

# The Reform-Era Russian City and the Limits of Visual Representation in Realist Art

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For reasons that should become clear further on, I begin this study of nineteenth-century urban imagery in Russia by taking a quick look at a twenty-first century artist's portrayal of the rural United States. *After the Deluge*, Kara Walker's 2006 exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, offered a thought-provoking visual critique of realist imagery, particularly of the kind of art that sets out to represent a specific time and place. The exhibit was part of a series in which an artist teams with a curator and draws on the museum's collections in order to produce something new. Walker chose to work with a series of images of the American South originally published in *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*. She enlarges the original images to several feet across, and then superimposes on them her own silhouette-style depictions of the slave experience during the same period [fig. 1]. Walker's technique of superimposition produces a single, jarringly dissonant contrast between two representations of the same time and place. She shoves two separate versions of one history into a single, awkward image. What results is not a beautiful—but certainly an intriguing—art of incongruity, counterpoint and critique.<sup>1</sup>

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1 There is not yet any published material on this exhibit, but the Metropolitan Museum of Art website offers a brief overview. See [[http://www.metmuseum.org/special/kara\\_walker/images.asp](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/kara_walker/images.asp)] (accessed October 4, 2007).

While the original *Harper's* illustrations appear at first glance to be reasonable representations of their subject (more blandly documentary than polemical or sentimental), Walker's overlays destroy their presumption of impartial transparency. The weary but ennobled wartime American South depicted in *Harper's* was also, Walker reminds her viewers, the south that harbored the brutalities of slavery and later sustained segregation and racial violence. The powerful contrast to Walker's silhouettes suggests that for the African-American slaves in whose interest the war was (in part) fought, the *Harper's* depiction of war was peripheral, a reflection of the world of slave owners and outsiders that had little to do with those who were owned. The sharp contrasts Walker creates underline the fact that visual representations most effectively communicate their messages to a pre-defined audience. Her work implies that even apparently simple and harmless realist illustrations can communicate in authoritarian tones. Walker uses a visual medium to demonstrate that images which seem to do little more than impart information can, in fact, occlude different kinds of information, obscuring other possible perspectives that might conflict with them.

A simplistic response to Walker's exhibit would accept her art of juxtaposition at the level of polemic, and either agree or disagree that *Harper's Pictorial History* was whitewashing some of the more salient horrors of its time. But *After the Deluge* also raises a more complicated point. As her earlier work with silhouettes has revealed, Walker's imagination works in dialogic fashion. Where her silhouettes of the slave era united in a single image a refined, Victorian technique with a crude and violent experience, her overlays go even further to interrogate one image of space and time with another; they ask us to open up the seemingly straightforward reportorial illustration to a kind of visual conversation.<sup>2</sup> One can almost imagine Walker's next project as a reverse intervention, this time of placid domestic scenes superimposed

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2 On the earlier work of Kara Walker, see, for example, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

on images of violence. Walker's work reminds us that whatever they manage to reveal, mimetic images remain confined by the limits inherent to the particular field of meaning, to the visual language in which they operate.

Russian realist painters of the late nineteenth century, trying to put on canvas a clear and unblinking depiction of the Russian city, also bumped up against the limits of their artistic "realism." Around the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of Russian painters began the attempt to represent what they understood as the lived experience of urban Russia; to paraphrase the painters themselves, they sought to put on canvas "truths" that nobody before them had dared to portray.<sup>3</sup> This admirable aim, to exhibit the hidden sides of the Russian city for all to see, emerged from and complemented those contemporaneous realist novels and works of investigative journalism that sought to expose what wary officials, and decorous society, would not tolerate as public expression. In its time this "critical realism" in Russian art was justly applauded for unmasking the hidden dark sides of urban life.<sup>4</sup> But, as I will argue here, the expository task the realist painters set for themselves in turn created its own set of limitations. In this respect, comparisons to the radically different (but also realist) depictions of Paris in the work of contemporary French painters are particularly instructive. Ultimately, I will suggest that the insufficiencies of the Russian realist approach to the city was not a matter of any specific incapacity on the part of Russia's painters; rather it sprang from problems inherent in the realist project as a whole.

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3 G. G. Miasoedov, for example, argued that Russia's realist painters succeeded in propounding a "truthful" vision of Russian life. See "Otchet zachitannyi G. G. Miasoedovym obshchemu sobraniuu chlenov Tovarishchestva peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok," in Iu. K. Korolev et al., eds., *Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok, 1869–1899: Pis'ma, dokumenty* (Moscow, 1987), p. 335.

4 Vladimir Stasov helped push Russian painters in this direction in his early essays. See for example V. V. Stasov, *Izbrannye sochineniia: zhivopis', skul'ptura, muzyka* (Moscow, 1952).

## Conflicting Images of the City

Images of the Russian city changed drastically in the early years of reform under Alexander II (1855–1881). The urban imagery of the early 1860s already had little in common with representations of the city from just a decade or so before. In order to understand why such dramatic change occurred at this time, and why the critical realist approach to painting came to appeal to reform-era artists, it is instructive to observe the history of urban imagery in Russia.<sup>5</sup> The city had long been a favorite subject among Russian artists and viewers alike, dating back at least as far as the reign of Peter the Great (1689–1725). But the works that appeared in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were nearly always aligned with the city's official presentation. St. Petersburg was in many ways, after all, the state's greatest monument: a testament in stone to Russia's place in world civilization. Grand cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg could not but represent the success or failure of the Russian state as a political power. Thus from the perspective of the autocracy, images of the city were volatile material and had to be handled carefully. For many decades Russian painters, who in this era rarely possessed the economic independence to act autonomously, played their part and represented the city in ways that would not conflict with official values. At a time when the state maintained sufficient authority to control representations of itself, even written depictions of Russian cities were carefully monitored to ensure the city appear in its best light. Witness, for example, the fate of Pushkin's poem, "The Bronze Horseman," which because of its implied criticism did not get past censorship even though it contains one of the more admiring portrayals of St. Petersburg that Russian literature has to offer.<sup>6</sup> Since visual material was considered

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5 For a compendium of Russian urban imagery across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, *Russkii peizazh kontsa XVIII–nachala XIX veka* (Moscow, 1952). See also A. M. Gordin, *Pushkinskii Peterburg* (St. Petersburg, 1991).

6 The Russian censorship refused to publish the poem, and it only appeared posthumously. See Ernest J. Simmons, *Pushkin* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1971),

at least as dangerous as literature, in that it might more easily appeal to the illiterate mass, paintings of Russian cities from around 1750 to 1850 were almost uniformly characterized by a skillful evocation of stateliness, monumentality, tranquility, cleanliness and above all, martial and civilian order.

Contemporaries did not necessarily consider this imagery a faithful replication of the urban environment, but neither for the most part were they bothered by that. In the grand tradition of high art still very much alive in the early nineteenth century, paintings were meant to ennoble the people and places they portrayed. Painters represented the city not as it was but as it was supposed to be. Still it should be kept in mind that in spite of this tendency to idealize urban space, the image of the city during this hundred year period was not entirely static. Both internal dynamics and external fashion played a role in its evolution. Representations of Petersburg and Moscow evince a clear progress from a kind of cold stateliness in the mid-eighteenth century to a warm, if still quite orderly, idealization of street life during the later years of Catherine II (1762–1796), and from there to a comic imagery of the less exalted, quotidian street during the later years of Nicholas I (1825–1855). But in spite of such gradual change, until mid-century the city in Russian art remained almost exclusively the sanctioned, official city, a city with the noise, smells, and conflict removed.

In what are perhaps the best known cityscapes in the early nineteenth century, those painted by Fedor Alekseev or Vasiliï Sadovnikov's *Panorama of Nevskii prospekt*, St. Petersburg appears grand, industrious, and socially self-segregating [fig. 2]. Alekseev's paintings depicted recognizable locations, but at the same time they served as metonymous representations of the city as a whole. In Alekseev's Petersburg, people do not crowd together in potentially disorderly masses but neatly divide into single individuals or pairs that are quickly recognizable in terms of social and occupational identity. However grand and efficient Alekseev managed to make the city appear

in his paintings, there is still something empty about his cityscapes, as though both architecture and inhabitants maintained a well-dressed, public formality. Only rarely in paintings before the 1840s do we catch glimpses of intimacy in depictions of the city streets. In accord with a self-reinforcing logic, Alekseev's public space was complemented (somewhat later) by those well-known private dramas painted by Pavel Fedotov. Fedotov's paintings gave viewers a satirical, and almost painfully awkward, glimpse into the private sphere of middle income Petersburg. Fedotov's urban interiors insisted on their displays of intimacy just as vehemently as Alekseev's streetscapes insisted on their formality. The separate spheres of public and private space remained distinct. Emotion was allowed indoors, while the street maintained its official demeanor.

Grigorii Kaganov has argued that the essential change in representations of the city took place around mid-century and was connected to the increasing importance of the *raznochintsy* in Russian life. In his view, educated elites of the early nineteenth century were taught to take in the city in panoramic overview, to appreciate it from on high, whereas the new *raznochinets* city dweller, who played a greater role in urban life in the wake of the reforms, saw the city at the level of everyday life and conceptualized it in those more familiar terms.<sup>7</sup> Certainly the neoclassical interest in admiring the world "from on high" had been losing significance since the late eighteenth century in favor of a romantic (later realist) focus on the everyday and particular.<sup>8</sup> Russia's shift toward new forms of urban representation came even later as a result of the controlling hand of the autocratic state and Russian artists' conformity to conservative standards.<sup>9</sup>

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7 G. Z. Kaganov, *Sankt-Peterburg: Obrazy prostranstva* (Moscow, 1995).

8 See John Barrell, "The Public Prospect and the Private View: The Politics of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain" in Simon Pugh, *Reading Landscape: Country-City-Capital* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 19-40.

9 For a variety of reasons, the Imperial Academy of the Arts was able to channel and control the output of Russian artists before the middle of the nineteenth century and to a great extent thereafter as well. See Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art:*

As Rosalind Gray has pointed out, “one of the remarkable phenomena of the history of Russian art is the way in which several distinct movements [...] coexisted simultaneously.”<sup>10</sup> The shift to critical realism emerged from a kind of transitional phase that took place in the 1840s. This phase is summed up rather well by the nineteenth-century genre term *ulichnye tipy*. Images that went by the name *ulichnye tipy* (at first mainly engravings and illustrations but later even ceramic figurines and postcards) shared elements of both the early formal approach and the later realist particularity.<sup>11</sup> At one and the same time, these images divided the street into the kind of classifiable archetypes that had been represented in urban landscapes for decades and used these classifications to create a variety of comic stock figures that enabled the artist to look closely, if satirically, at the man on the street. Strictly speaking, the genre of *ulichnye tipy* only represented separate individuals, carefully illustrated as if for scientific observation, but the larger streetscapes of the 1840s and 1850s typically were pieced together from collections of these comic figures. Artists of this era like Rudolf Zhukovskii or Vasily Timm had quit portraying the streets of St. Petersburg as placid and orderly, but they were not yet interested in arousing any genuine empathy for their subjects in the viewer. The streets of these artists hustle and bustle with the external facades of countless *ulichnye tipy* thrown together into the kind of heap of external attributes that Gogol’ satirized in *Nevskii prospekt*. These images, in other words, let us know that although we are now looking at the city from a close, street level vantage point, still as educated viewers we remain at a distance, elevated away from them, where we can laugh at their predictable concerns and behavior.

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*The State and Society; The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977).

10 Rosalind P. Gray, *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 95.

11 Several versions of the genre appear in O. A. Chekanova et al., eds., *Obrazy Peterburga* (St. Petersburg, 2002).

## Critical Realism and the Russian City

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Russian city had begun to undergo a process of rapid change that would continue right up to the Revolution and beyond. Population growth, the initial phases of industrialization, the profusion of slums, and the rise of a newly active public sphere, all contributed to an essential reshaping of urban life. Artists in the 1860s were faced with the challenge of both accounting for the new urban space and countering the old, official imagery, which seemed less and less viable as a representation of the new city. One of the first painters to do so was Adrian Volkov. We find in Volkov's work of the 1850s a partial step away from the art of comic typology into a sympathetic rendering of urban life that maintained comic elements but also carefully scrutinized the city's inhabitants. A good example is his *Food Stalls in Petersburg* [*Obzhornyi riad v Peterburge*] (1858). This painting certainly contains elements of comic relief—a drunk reclining in a barrel, a mischievous street urchin, a curious dog—but on the whole the subject matter is more sedate and inquisitive. Volkov's painting does not elicit laughter at the low urban "other" so much as it simply puts urban interaction on display. The figures here are close enough so that we can recognize the distinct expressions on their faces, and for the most part Volkov allows them a gravity and anonymity that suggests the urban landscape is peopled with understandable fellow human beings. Volkov did not put his viewers at a distance from the city's inhabitants; now it seems the viewer has become one urban onlooker among many others.

But for all its verisimilitude, Volkov's painting cannot be called a work of "realism" any more than we would apply that term to, say, a work of Dutch genre from the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> The street scene and the figures portrayed in it are assembled with painterly intent so as to offer us a general overview of Petersburg street life. It would be impossible to imagine that the separate events portrayed represent

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12 Indeed, it is clear that Volkov was inspired by the vogue for the work of David Teniers that swept Russian art and literature around this time.

anything like a given moment of urban life. The absence in Russian realism of that “moment in time” quality so characteristic of realism elsewhere would continue to differentiate images of the Russian city from dominant trends in Western European urban imagery.

At the same time Volkov’s paintings of the 1850s were also quite distinct from the Russian realism that quickly came to dominate in the 1860s. Urban imagery of the 1860s was closely connected to the development of the “art of denunciation” that characterized critical realism. This Russian version of realism emerged for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most important being the rising influence of that group of critics, publicists and intellectuals which came to be called the “intelligentsia.” From the early 1860s, Russia’s intelligentsia began to promote what Elizabeth Valkenier has described as, “the obligation of artists to participate in civic life.”<sup>13</sup> And in this context *participation* meant *condemnation* of an oppressive political system and a tradition-bound society. Especially among painters of the early 1860s, a loosely affiliated group began to deploy their work as a polemical weapon in the struggle to expose the imbalances and injustices in Russian society.

*Child Beggars* (1863) by Firs Zhuravlev [fig. 3] provides a good example of urban imagery as an opportunity for social criticism. In one way the scene depicted here might be generally familiar to anyone who has spent time in a city where mendicancy is a part of everyday life. Something similar to the hope in the children’s eyes and the determined but frustrated expression of the passerby remain familiar and unfortunate sights even today. The children’s threadbare clothing, the frozen landscape, the folder under the man’s arm, and the large building in the background all combine to communicate to the viewer a familiar story of the city as a place of disparity, in which those deserving of care do not receive it while others continue to go about their business. But despite its capacity to convey injustice and produce sympathetic recognition from the viewer, it is not difficult to see in this painting why Russian realist imagery, considered subversive at the time it was created, sometimes

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13 Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, pp. 17–23.

later came to be lumped in with France's conservative salon art.<sup>14</sup> The main aim of the anti-traditional French realists, and to an even greater degree of their successors the Impressionists, was to freeze a segment of time in order to document the passing moment. Works of realism intentionally presented themselves as isolated moments, removed from any kind of narrative. In the case of *Child Beggars*, by contrast, Zhuravlev's imagery rests on an implied narrative. The tattered clothing and hungry, expectant eyes of the children conjure up a "backstory," while his cap, papers, warm scarf and cold expression do the same for the passing man. The relative absence of extraneous details, moreover, encourages the viewer to reflect on the story behind this weighty moment. "The paintings of those genreists who preferred urban themes," as Dmitri Sarabianov has put it, "reveal many of the characteristics of the short story or anecdote."<sup>15</sup>

Russia's "denunciatory" realism did not base itself on social satire; rather it was closer to an art of political criticism. Where the *ulichnyye tipy* provoked laughter at the foibles of an urban everyman, the realists depicted recognizable, sympathetic figures, in difficult (sometimes tragic) situations, as a critique of the way things were and an implicit suggestion that they could be otherwise. The rise of this new approach to urban imagery can be attributed to a variety of factors beyond the influence of the intelligentsia. In addition to increasingly evident economic disparities within the historical city itself, the influence of a new urban-oriented realist literature in Western Europe and Russia (for example the "physiological sketch") must be taken into account, as should the influence of French painters like Courbet, Daumier and Millet, who helped establish the validity of an art based on mimetic reflections of everyday life. Perhaps also the fact that depictions of Russian cities had long remained closely tied to an official and elite imagery, realist

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14 For examples of Russian realism being misinterpreted as salon painting see Aleksa Celebonovic, *The Heyday of Salon Painting: Masterpieces of Bourgeois Realism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974).

15 Dmitri V. Sarabianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant-Garde, 1800–1917; Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 135.

artists in Russia chose to abandon any kind of middle ground and moved directly toward a critique of the city as a troubled and difficult place. The vehemence with which these artists struggled to counterbalance official depictions of the city helps explain why they did not really develop other approaches to the urban environment. By conceiving of their art as a political tool to correct an imbalance, they restricted the variety of ways in which they could approach urban Russia.

Perhaps because the “art of denunciation” in this period was so obviously based on a version of verisimilitude, the degree to which it departs from the main currents of artistic realism has not been sufficiently appreciated. In order to expose and condemn the difficulties of contemporary life Russia’s critical realists ignored some of the primary aims of realism elsewhere which, as Linda Nochlin has shown, were essentially a matter of capturing the contemporary moment as a historical fact. With respect mainly to French realism Nochlin has written, “[...] the only valid subject for the contemporary artist was the contemporary world. *‘Il faut être de son temps’* [...]”<sup>16</sup> Or as the realist painter Gustave Courbet put it, “Each epoch must have its artists who express it and reproduce it for the future [...]”<sup>17</sup> With the impressionists the call to paint one’s epoch became an even more insistent demand to paint the very moment of time in which one stood. To accomplish this, French realists and impressionists asserted their images of the city as if they were arbitrarily selected slices of the modern world. In *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire had called on artists to elicit “the ephemeral, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and immutable.”<sup>18</sup>

The realism that was emerging in the artistic centers (mainly in Paris) was reacting against canonical traditions, mentioned above, that saw everyday life as unworthy of expression in art; Parisian painters

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16 Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 28.

17 Ibid.

18 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaedon, 1964), p. 4.

were making a statement about contemporary life, showing that it too was worth representing in oil. To be sure, French realists incorporated a critical element into their work: “They turned for inspiration to the worker, the peasant, the laundress, the prostitute, to the middle-class or working-class café...” and oftentimes “exposed” the seamier side of urban life, but they depicted these places and figures with a primary interest in their visual attributes, in creating an art out of the everyday city, rather than a polemical weapon out of art.<sup>19</sup> By and large the main intent of French realism was to commemorate the contemporary world, to present it as worthy of representation in a way that was not being carried out in the art academies and above all at the Paris Salon.

Realist/impressionist attempts to capture the contemporary moment required an emphasis on limited angles of vision (we are allowed to see only what a passing observer might notice), awkwardness (everyday life does not resolve itself into classically harmonious forms), and indecipherability (the modern city is filled with thousands of fleeting surfaces and the viewer must grow accustomed to the inability to know them more deeply). A good example of these characteristics is found in Edouard Manet’s *Universal Exposition of 1867* [fig. 4] in which the city appears on canvas as essentially impenetrable. Manet’s painting technique, more so even than in the work of many impressionist painters, refuses access to a sympathy for (or even understanding of) his figures. The individuals and groups portrayed in this painting seem to have nothing to do with one another. They carry on their various functions, as a sort of cross-section of urban life, but the viewer would be hard pressed to explain why Manet chose to portray this *particular* view of Paris. At six feet wide by three feet high, the painting was clearly intended to make a statement about the city, and yet its very sketchiness and lack of composition evokes the momentary glance rather than the monumental commemoration. One might say the painting *is* a monumental commemoration, but a commemoration of the transitory character, the

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19 Nochlin, *Realism*, p. 34.

fleeting immateriality of busy, crowded, contemporary urban life.<sup>20</sup>

Russia's urban realists embarked on another mission entirely. Certainly they learned from and used the new vogue for verisimilitude and the new focus on everyday life that came into fashion in European art around mid-century. Indeed they provoked similar criticism to that in Paris from conservatives who still saw art as the realm of the eternally beautiful.<sup>21</sup> But the context of their work was not an attempt to valorize the plusses and minuses of the modern city, in part because it would have been difficult even to envision the Russian city of the 1860s *as* modern. If the reforms that dominated public discussion were clearly focused on modernization and change, they implicitly recognized that such change was needed in Russia but had not yet fully materialized. The painter Ilya Repin described the 1860s as a starting point on the path to modernity: "Russian life reawakened after a long period of moral lethargy, and began to see clearly. Its first desire was to cleanse and purify itself of all its slag, of everything stagnant and antiquated."<sup>22</sup> It was not possible in Russia to convey the "heroism of modern life," as Baudelaire titled one of his chapters, because modern life, while perhaps just over the horizon, had not yet dawned. Thus critical realism, as an art of denunciation or exposure, situated itself as a way to *assist* the process of modernization. It revealed the problems Russia faced in the hope of bringing about their amelioration. With this aim in mind, Russia's critical realists produced a very different vision of the city, and a very different kind of art, than the urban imagery that has come down to us from the Parisian center as prototypical realism.

Those characteristics of realist and impressionist Paris listed above—limited vision, awkwardness and indecipherability—all would have gotten in the way of the main goal among Russian realists: to show what was wrong with contemporary life with a view toward its

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20 For an extended discussion of this image see T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 60–66.

21 See G. Iu. Sternin, *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn' Rossii serediny XIX v.* (Moscow, 1991).

22 Il'ia Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* (repr., Leningrad, 1982).

improvement. In this respect, it is interesting to note how Russian studies and sketches for images of the city had more in common with the main currents of realism in France than did the painters' finished products. Take, for example, Viktor Vasnetsov's 1876 *From One Apartment to Another* [fig. 5] in which an elderly couple, apparently laden with all of their belongings, moves to more affordable lodgings. The artist's initial sketch is loose and undefined. It seems to locate its main figures in a relatively crowded city, letting them blend in as part of their surroundings. In the finished work, however, as one art historian put it, "Vasnetsov gradually rid the composition of superfluous detail...[and] thus the figures of the homeless old people appear still more helpless and their prospects more dismal"<sup>23</sup> [fig. 6]. The viewer of the finished painting encounters an immediate and unobstructed vision of the scene. The composition is worked out in a series of formalist, academically inspired triangular patterns that are satisfying to the eye. And all of the details in the painting serve a purpose. The tower of the *Petropavlovskaiia krepost'* lets us know roughly where we are, what appears to be the discarded hull of a boat in the ice complements the decrepitude of the main figures, and the dog adds a touch of sentimentality. Ultimately, the carefully constructed composition of Vasnetsov's painting does the exact opposite of Manet's work described above. Rather than leave us with a sense of fleeting unknowability, it centers the entire painting on the faces of the two figures: the wife's expression stolid and determined; the husband's filled with anxiety. Because of its interest in directing our gaze and telegraphing our response, this painting represents the city as a stage for recognizable human drama. It does not convey a contemporary moment so much as it calls to mind an easily grasped, universally understandable, dilemma. The city, the painting seems to say, degrades those who deserve better. Vasnetsov treats this urban environment as a backdrop for the sufferings of the elderly couple. And to the degree that his painting focuses on their story in particular, it tells us less about the city as a whole.

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23 N. Shanina, *Viktor Vasnetsov* (Leningrad, 1979), p. 31.

Another well-known critical realist image of the Russian city, Vassily Perov's *Drowned Woman* also began as a much more open-ended study. Looking at this study, for all its lack of detail, the viewer cannot help but envision a city beyond the edge of the image in which other unrelated events continue to take place [fig. 7]. Precisely because of its lack of detail, it presents the spectacle of the drowned woman as part of a larger, ongoing urban experience. The finished work is different [fig. 8]. Here Perov manages to focus our attention on the figures as part of a dual tragedy. On the one hand, the woman's uncovered face and recognizable clothing ask the viewer to contemplate her humanity, to wonder how and why she drowned. The face of the policeman is also more exposed, but in the dull torpor of his eyes Perov offers us an entry point into what has been called urban anomie, the condition of being overwhelmed by and detached from the suffering of others. The policeman seems more interested in his pipe than in the drowned woman. Again as in Vasnetsov's painting, *Drowned Woman* seems to suspend time. Our visual proximity to the figures, their careful composition, and the way they are arrayed against a misty, early morning background, all render the city a setting rather than a subject in its own right. As a condemnation of the city, these paintings by Vasnetsov and Perov suggest some of the problems inherent in modern, urban life, but because they accentuate narrative they do not offer that sense of entry into urban space that is so fundamental to the work of the French realists.

Both the French and Russian traditions of urban realism produced images that functioned, in metonymous fashion, as reflections of the entire cities they represented.<sup>24</sup> But the similarities do not extend much further. Where the French artists tended to suspend judgment and attempted to see the city, as Claude Monet famously put it, like "a man born blind [who] then suddenly gained his sight," the Russian realists put their critical faculties first and rendered the city a problem to solve.<sup>25</sup> The

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24 Parts of this conclusion were suggested at the 2006 Winter Symposium of the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University. In particular I would like to thank Yusuke Toriyama, Kayo Fukuma and Susumu Nonaka.

25 Cited in L. C. Perry, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Russian realist painter who devoted the greatest part of his career to depictions of the city was Vladimir Makovskii. Makovskii's sustained output makes possible a contrast of his *oeuvre* with that of the French realists. While the realists, and the impressionists in particular, are noted for their remarkable productivity, Makovskii was capable of working for years on a single painting. The difference between these painters was mainly, of course, a matter of *plein air* versus studio work, but this basic difference in technique originated from divergent philosophies. Hoping to capture a precise moment in space and time, the French painters increasingly insisted on a rapid, immediate method of portraying their subjects. By contrast, Makovskii labored for years in order to capture something more essential. If in *Paris Street in the Rain* [fig. 9] Gustave Caillebotte presents passersby in their essential anonymity, as an expression of the larger anonymity of public space, in *Bank Failure* [fig. 10] Makovskii sought to show each individual emotional reaction to a familiar and devastating event.

Richard Sennet has described the modern city as increasingly illegible. "Cities of the nineteenth century," he writes, "were particularly unclear. They had grown quickly, enormously, and messily; there were few past models to explain them."<sup>26</sup> Confronting this illegibility, artists could try either to capture it or to overcome it. French realism struggled to put it on canvas. Edgar Degas's *Place de La Concorde*, for example, portrays a wealthy, aristocratic family but only to suggest that the open space and rapid movement of the city would imminently swallow up the significance of their wealth and title. Ultimately, as in the later canvases of Pissarro, the individual lives and stories of the city's inhabitants are resolved into a new kind of landscape of the open boulevard.<sup>27</sup> For the Russian realists, on the other hand, the city never became a landscape because the stories within it seemed too important to treat as mere

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Prentice Hall, 1966), pp. 35–36.

26 Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), pp. 190–191.

27 On the city as landscape see Clark, *Modern Life*, pp. 23–78.

imagery. The Russian realist confrontation with the city tended to *combat* illegibility, to use the art of painting as a means to surmount the otherwise anonymous nature of the increasingly complex urban environment. Thus the Russian realists found ways to make the city legible, to offer viewers keys to the proper “reading” of its images. Suggestive titles of paintings like *Bank Failure*, *Merry Makers*, *Gostinyi Dvor*, *Off to War*, etc. helped viewers frame their response. Moreover, many of the Russian realist images literally contained helpful signage. Some even explicitly depicted the act of reading as a sign of newly acquired knowledge. If the French painters managed with effort to resolve the new Parisian boulevards into a “landscape” in which the figures, like the city itself, were unknown and largely illegible, Makovskii’s version of a Moscow boulevard in his painting *On the Boulevard* [fig. 11] was aptly praised by a Soviet-era art historian precisely for its readability: “[A]s always with the artist there is nothing trivial in this scene, each figure, every detail is in its place and works toward its ultimate goal—to elicit from the viewer sympathy for the heroine of the painting.”<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

One argument that would seem to explain the basic difference between these two divergent styles of realist art comes to mind immediately: the cities themselves were growing increasingly different from one another. While Parisian streets in the wake of Haussmann had come to be dominated by the bourgeoisie, perhaps public space in Moscow and Petersburg remained the domain of the poor and downtrodden. Indeed, some of the most familiar literature of the period—Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* or Krestovskii’s *Petersburg Slums*, for example—would seem to corroborate that essential distinction. But the dichotomy presents itself almost too readily. Russian cities had long possessed broad, open promenades and fancy shopping areas for the well-heeled, and such

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28 S. G. Kaplanova, *Vladimir Makovskii* (Moscow, 1986), pp. 8–9.

spaces were familiar subjects of popular art and literature [fig. 12]. Nor did Paris magically erase its own squalor and poverty, even if Haussmann did help to push it to the periphery.<sup>29</sup> We are dealing here less with differences between cities than with choices made by artists and the visual language in which those choices are embedded.

French realism, it might be said, captured the feel of the city as a whole, while Russian realism explored the lives of the city's inhabitants. In artistic terms French realism, from Courbet forward, was wildly successful. It invented works of art and techniques that remain valued the world over. By some measures, it also achieved a successful depiction of the city. The hundreds of widely known realist and impressionist cityscapes add up to a portrayal of Paris so powerful as to convince viewers even today of their intimate familiarity with the Paris of the late nineteenth century. That success, however, was achieved at the expense of another type of engagement with the city that acknowledged its other sides. The industrial city, even Paris after Haussmann, was filled with cramped, squalid, and unhealthy neighborhoods, but the urban landscape of the impressionists for the most part presents the splendid veneer of the city. Some French realist and impressionist paintings depicted, say, fighting on the barricades, or the dark corners of brothels and nightclubs, but as a whole this body of work provides little sense of the fact that France in this era was living through times of industrialization, revolution, war and violent social conflict. The French realist city is almost all spectacle with very little historical texture behind that spectacle; it is an aesthetically appealing urban landscape, a slice of space at a particular moment, and at the same time somewhat distant from human warmth and empathy; it is a successful expression of Baudelaire's vision of "the heroism of modern life."

Some few Russian realist images celebrated the city as landscape, but these either focused on monuments, continuing traditions from the early nineteenth century, or even resolved the city into an almost rural

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29 On Haussmann's tremendous influence shaping Paris in the mid-nineteenth century see David Jordan, *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

scenery, as in Polenov's *Moscow Courtyard*. Those Russian images that most closely approximated French portrayals of the city were painted by Fedor Vasil'ev. Tellingly, Vasil'ev's paintings were the work of a young landscape painter who mainly concentrated on the countryside, and his cityscapes never went beyond the stage of sketches. For the Russian realists, the modernizing, reform-era city was a place that contained meaningful spectacles, but it never really became a spectacle in its own right. In seeking to explain why, it would be as mistaken to suggest that something about the historical reality of Russian cities kept them from being presented as spectacular landscape as it would be to argue that Paris was actually synonymous with the splendid visual feast that appears on the canvases of the impressionists. Instead "one must ask," as T. J. Clark proposes, "what type of 'visibility' a certain symbolic system made possible; and in what specific circumstance one artist could take advantage of this, and another fail to."<sup>30</sup> Because of their historical context, Russian artists were working with a particular "symbolic system," a visual language that encouraged them to understand their cities in terms of identifiable narratives, while French artists came to see Paris as a kind of landscape or spectacle and emphasized the visual experience of it. Ultimately, the point is that visual expression, at least that within the static, single image, is not a dialogic medium. It asserts itself within a fixed set of possibilities.

The work of Kara Walker, discussed above, deploys a visual medium to imply that images emerge from "symbolic systems" in which a context for their reception has already been established. The given system is what enables a visual medium to become a form of communication, so much so that in its absence that communication could not exist. Historians often, and understandably, use visual imagery transparently, as a direct expression of a particular time and place. I hope this comparison of French and Russian cities in art will suggest how important it is to keep in mind the serious pitfalls of using visual imagery

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30 T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848–1851* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 16–17.

in such an unproblematized way. The difficulty, as Walker's work shows, is that images outside a particular system, or language, make little sense, or even contradict and conflict with those within the system. Walker's work asks us to consider what is missing, what cannot be shown in a particular context. It may well be that Paris and Petersburg in the 1860s and 1870s were not so dissimilar as they seem to appear from the visual record. Painters in both cities ran up against the limits of visual representation, which are much more restricting than we sometimes assume.

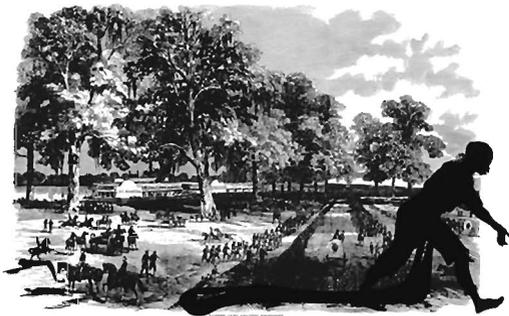


fig. 1 Kara Walker, *Banks's Army Leaving Simmsport*.  
*Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* (Annotated) (2005)



fig. 2 Fedor Alekseev, *View of the Admiralty  
and Palace Embankment from Vasiliev Island* (1817)



fig. 3 Firs Zhuravlev, *Child Beggars* (1863)



fig. 4 Edouard Manet, *Universal Exposition of 1867* (1867)



fig. 5 Viktor Vasnetsov, *From One Apartment to Another* (study)



fig. 6 Vasnetsov, *From One Apartment to Another* (1876)



fig. 7 Vassily Perov, *Drowned Woman* (study)



fig. 8 Perov, *Drowned Woman* (1867)



fig. 9 Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street in the Rain* (1877)



fig. 10 Vladimir Makovskii, *Bank Failure* (1881)



fig. 11 Vladimir Makovskii, *On the Boulevard* (1887)



fig. 12 Artist Unknown, *Gostinnyi Dvor*