

with the Itinerants because, influenced by the French Impressionists, he stressed color whereas they emphasized design and content. Nevertheless he maintained close personal relations with members of the group, Kramskoi included.

In 1882, unexpectedly, he ceased to exhibit and withdrew from the public eye. This self-imposed isolation lasted until his death twenty-eight years later. Apparently he feared that he would not be able to duplicate his previous triumphs for some of his later paintings met with a cool response from the public. He gave a hint of his reasoning to the fellow-painter, Ia. D. Minchenkov:

I am asked why I have ceased to exhibit. Well, this is how it is: an artist ought to display at an exhibition for as long as, like a singer, he has a voice. But as soon as the voice weakens, one must leave, not show oneself, so that people would not laugh. So I have become Arkhip Ivanovich, known to all, but then, fine, I realized that I could not create as I had created before, that the voice has somehow deteriorated. So they will say, there was a Kuindzhi and now there no longer is a Kuindzhi!²¹⁸

He taught for a while at the reformed Academy of Arts where he was appointed Professor in 1892 but was dismissed from it five years later for supporting a student strike. He turned out to be a very successful investor, accumulating a substantial fortune, which included 225 acres of land in the Crimea. In 1904 he donated to the Academy 100,000 rubles, the income from which was to be used for art prizes bearing his name. Five years later he created an artistic society named after himself, which tsar Nicholas II took under his patronage, and funded it with the Crimean real estate as well as 150,000 rubles in bonds for prizes.²¹⁹

Kuindzhi stands out as a solitary figure in the Itinerant movement, perhaps the first of its members to stress color and overall impression above design. It is regrettable that his colors proved to be fugitive and that today one cannot appreciate his paintings as they were in his own time.

6. I. E. Repin

Ilia Efimovich Repin (1844–1930) was the most famous of the Itinerant artists and arguably the most popular Russian painter of all time. Some canvasses of

²¹⁸⁾ Minchenkov, *Vospominaniia*, 192.

²¹⁹⁾ Manin, *Kuindzhi*, 158–60.

his, such as the “Volga Barge Haulers” and “Zaporozhe Cossacks replying to the Sultan” can be seen to this day on the walls of Russian homes and offices. And this despite the fact that he practically stopped painting in his fifties because of an ailment that withered his right hand. The last thirty years of his life were not very productive.

Repin was born in the Ukraine near Kharkov the son of a military colonist. The military colonies had been established in the reign of Alexander I soon after the Napoleonic wars for the purpose of easing the financial burden on the treasury of maintaining a large standing army. The soldiers enrolled in this program, which eventually assumed massive forms, combined farming with military duties, supporting themselves and their families by tilling the soil. They belonged to the tax-paying, non-privileged estate.

After doing some work for a local icon painter, Repin, who had keen artistic ambitions, arrived in St. Petersburg in the fall of 1863, shortly before the rebellion of the 14, with a bit of cash, eager to enroll at the Academy. His first attempt at this failed, whereupon he took some lessons in drawing and sculpting as an Academy auditor, and a year later was admitted as a full-time student. He quickly proved his talents by winning medals. In November 1871 he earned the Large Gold Medal with a biblical scene, “The Resurrection of Jairus’s Daughter,” and received the six-year foreign stipend that came with it but he requested that he be allowed to spend three years in Russia, and three abroad. The request was granted.

Even before graduating from the Academy Repin produced a masterpiece, the “Volga Barge-haulers,” that provoked a sensation wherever it was exhibited including Vienna and Paris. Repin left us a lengthy account of how the painting originated that helps dispel some persistent myths about it.²²⁰

As he tells it, some time in 1868 he was invited by a colleague to go on a boat trip on the Neva, and while admiring the elegant mansions that bordered it and the equally elegant youths who amused themselves in them, he was suddenly struck by the sight of a group of peasants pulling a barge along the shore and against the current. These people were known as *burlaki*: they usually loaded and unloaded the vessels that they were hauling. Their tattered clothing contrasted sharply with the wealth that lined the river, yet they did not appear angry for they smiled amiably at the glamorous youths enjoying themselves on the river’s banks.²²¹ Observing Repin’s astonishment, his colleague

²²⁰) Repin, *Dalekoe-Blizkoe*, 275–362.

²²¹) Grabar, *Repin*, I: 94.



Figure 13. I. E. Repin, *The Volga barge haulers*, 1870-73.

suggested that he visit the Volga where the *burlaki* were a common sight. Repin followed this advice and two summers later, with 200 rubles provided by the Academy, made his way to the Volga. Settling near Stavropol, he closely studied the *burlaki* and even befriended some of them. He had them pose for 20 kopecks each. He returned to St. Petersburg in the autumn with numerous sketches which so impressed Grand Duke Vladimir Aleksandrovich, the Vice President of the Academy, that he commissioned from Repin a finished painting. Repin returned to the Volga the following summer and completed the canvas in 1873.

When exhibited, *Burlaki* was promptly interpreted by liberals and radicals as a symbolic denunciation of the suffering of the Russian people, and it has been viewed as such ever since. Thus the liberal historian Paul Miliukov quite typically described it as follows: “Out of a throng of ragamuffins, [Repin] create[d] an artistic symbol of the Russian people who for centuries have hauled their heavy governmental burden across a monotonous historical plain.”²²² But this prevalent opinion is wrong. It is clear from Repin’s own account that what struck him about the tattered peasants pulling a boat was the pictorial image: he says nothing of the social subtext commonly attributed to it.

This was evident already to Dostoevsky who protested against the commonplace interpretation:

I had scarcely read in the newspapers about Mr Repin’s *burlaki* when I felt fright. The subject itself is terrible: in our country it is somehow accepted that the *burlaki* are best capable of depicting the familiar idea of the unpaid debt of the upper classes to the people. And to my delight, my whole fear turned out to be unwarranted: they are *burlaki*, genuine *burlaki*, and nothing more. Not one of them shouts from the painting to the viewer: “Look how miserable I am and how much you owe the people!”. This alone bestows on the artist the greatest merit. Glorious, familiar figures: the two leading *burlaki* almost laugh, at any rate they do not weep and certainly do not think about their social condition ... It is impossible to conceive that the thought of the politico-economic and social debt of the upper classes to the people could ever enter the impoverished, bowed head of this peasant, cowed by eternal grief ...²²³

As one Russian art historian put it, the subject of the painting is not the heavy burden borne by the common people but their strength of character.²²⁴

²²² Miliukov, *Ocherki*, II/2: 524.

²²³ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, 21 (Leningrad, 1980), 74.

²²⁴ O.A. Liaskovskaia, *Il’ia Efimovich Repin* (Moscow, 1982), 60.

An American biographer of Repin agrees that this painting, like Courbet's "Stone breakers," made the underprivileged a subject "deserving the same respectful, reflective handling" as the upper classes.²²⁵

Repin submitted the painting to the Academy in the hope of winning the title of Academician, but by a vote of 9 against 6 his application was rejected.²²⁶ Even so, the work brought him instant fame. It was purchased by Grand Duke Vladimir; Tretiakov bought a variant of the Grand Duke's original version for 4,000 rubles²²⁷ and Repin soon became the most highly paid artist in Russia.

The years 1873-76 Repin spent in Paris on an Academy fellowship. Unlike the majority of Russian painters who dismissed the Impressionists as fumbling amateurs, he admired their work, especially Manet's. He painted a number of canvasses in the Impressionist manner²²⁸ and tried to sell them but without success. The major canvas of his sojourn in France was "A Paris café" for which Kramskoi berated him. (See above, p. 372). It showed a youngish woman with an umbrella, seated in an outdoor café and gazed at by the men and women sitting at adjoining tables. By French standards of the day it was quite conventional. Exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1875 it attracted little attention and failed to sell. (It was acquired forty years later, in 1916, by a Swedish collector, Magnus Mansson.) Repin's experiences in France convinced him that he had no future in the West even though he greatly admired western painting and tried to emulate it. As he wrote Stasov from Paris: "Yes, we have nothing to learn here, they have a different principle, a different task: their world outlook is different."²²⁹

On his return to Russia Repin settled with his wife in Moscow, where he would reside for the next five years. Here he made the acquaintance of Savva Mamontov, a railroad magnate and art-lover who in 1870 had purchased an estate at Abramtsevo, not far from Moscow, and transformed it into an artists' colony. At Abramtsevo the Repins met many of Russia's leading artists and writers. In 1878, Repin joined the Itinerant Society, turning into one of its stars.

In 1883, he produced another masterpiece, "The Procession with the Cross in the Kursk Province." It depicts a broad array of types – bourgeois,

²²⁵) Valkenier, *Repin*, 39.

²²⁶) Liaskovakaia, *Repin*, 67.

²²⁷) Grabar, *Repin*, I: 114.

²²⁸) Sarabianov, *Russkaia zhivopis'*, 170.

²²⁹) Repin and Stasov, *Perepiska*, I: 80.

merchants, peasants, policemen – who follow, on a bright sunny day, a holy *ikon*. Kursk had suffered a serious draught and the procession was meant to propitiate God.²³⁰

The procession opens with an impressive group of tall, robust peasants in caftans of home-spun cloth, carrying an immense gilded lantern. “They all have grave, serious faces, full of dignity,” observes Stasov in his article about the exhibition, “they are true Hindus in a Buddhist procession on the shores of the Ganges ...” Behind this brown mass, beautifully colored, in the front follow two female pilgrims, bearing with comic reverence an empty container of “the miracle-working icon”. Behind them is a regent junior deacon with a choir in which an attentive viewer will identify tenors and basses. Further on walks a shaggy (*kudlastyi*) red-haired deacon. “The center of everything is the miracle-working picture, not large but all in gold and bathed in the rays of the sun, carried with great ceremony by a local aristocratic woman, a tradeswoman or a landlord, fat, stocky, boiled down by the sun, shutting her eyes from it, but all in bows and silks. Her assistant is the most influential local individual, a tax-farmer or contractor, now a gold bag, dressed already in a German frock-coat, but unmistakably of peasant origin, a coarse, impudent, brazen kulak. Next to him is a retired captain or major, without epaulets but in uniform. In the rear, are priests in golden garments, sparkling in the sun, in purple skull-caps and headgear, merrily talking to each other.” The singers “chant so assiduously that they neither hear nor see what is happening two steps away. And there, an evil village constable, surely an ex-cavalryman, sufficiently habituated, who also diligently attends to his business: he savagely flogs the crowd with his whip, pulling with a spasmodic motion of his left hand the head of his horse, and all this for no reason, to no purpose, just from diligence. From the crowd resound howls, head and bodies scatter in all directions, someone’s arm in a pink sleeve of a tunic dress is raised above the crowd as if hastening to defend itself from this beast. Another village constable, in the left corner of the painting, acts much more discreetly: he only threatens with the whip, leaning over from his horse. The local volost’ authorities also appear in two guises: some, the most zealous ones, have already proceeded to act, shoving and chasing around themselves with clubs. But there are not many of them, and the rest, who are very numerous, wherever one looks around, to the right, to the left, forward and in the rear, on foot and mounted – a real army in peasant caftans and all with name plates, humbly and quietly participate in the procession.²³¹

Repin worked on this canvas from 1877 to 1883, travelling repeatedly to Kursk. It was displayed at the 1883 Itinerant Exhibition.²³² The conservative

²³⁰ Alison Hilton, “Scenes from Life and Contemporary History” in Weisberg, ed., *The European Realist Tradition*, 199.

²³¹ Grabar, *Repin*, I: 228. The bulk of this citation comes from Stasov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, Part 2: 727–28.

²³² Repin was unable to explain to Tolstoy why he had painted it: Minchenkov, *Vospominaniia*, 172.



Figure 14: I. E. Repin, *Church procession in the Kursk province, 1881–83.*

press attacked it for depicting “ugly, animal-like and idiotic types.”²³³ Tretiakov, who had his own reservations about the painting, nevertheless bought it for 10,000. The two men had become very friendly and it is reported that Tretiakov visited Repin every Sunday, arousing the envy of other artists.²³⁴

Then, in 1884, came *Ne zhdali*, “They did not expect [him],” a snapshot-like depiction of the sudden return home of a prisoner released from hard labor, apparently as the result of the amnesty proclaimed on his coronation by Alexander III. The visitor, (in the original version a woman) haggard and in shabby clothing, enters the living room of his home, uncertain of the reception. His mother rises to her feet. His young son smiles, enraptured, but the



Figure 15: I. E. Repin, *They did not expect him*, 1884–88.

²³³) Jackson, *The Wanderers*, 44.

²³⁴) Grabar, *Repin*, I: 229.

daughter looks on him warily. The instant is caught with remarkable acuity. Repin agonized over the figure of the returning man, repainting his face four times even after selling it to Tretiakov for the unheard-of sum of 21,500 rubles, until he obtained the apprehensive expression he wanted.

In 1884, Repin separated from his wife. He was an incurable philanderer, having one affair after another, but she too had fallen in love with a young man, the son of Perov.²³⁵ They never reunited. In 1900, while on a trip to Paris, Repin met a married woman by the name of Natalia Borisovna Nordman, the daughter of an admiral. Nineteen years his junior, she was a writer who published under the name Natalia Severova (a translation of her Scandinavian name), until her death in 1914 she remained his inseparable companion.²³⁶ She made him into a vegetarian who even consumed straw which he came to recommend to anyone who would listen as ideal human food. She also taught him to dance to gramophone records: Tolstoy's wife recalled with annoyance the noise these night-time frolics caused above their bedroom when the two were visiting.²³⁷ Nordman placed at Repin's disposal her dacha, called "Penaty" and located near Kuokkala in Finland. There he would reside from 1907 until his death twenty-three years later.

Repin's last masterpiece was a picture of the Zaporozhe Cossacks, a community of freebooters, dictating to a scribe a collective letter to the Ottoman Sultan in response to his demand that they acknowledge his sovereignty. While the scribe writes down their insolent response, the Cossacks roar with laughter.²³⁸ This, possibly Repin's most popular canvas, like many of his others repainted several times, was purchased by Alexander III for an unprecedented 35,000 rubles.

Shortly after this painting had been completed, Repin began to experience trouble with his right hand. He tried to attach the brush to it, then switched to the left hand, but things got progressively worse and in time he was unable to control his hand's movements. This led to a steady deterioration of his art. When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917 Repin stayed put in Kuokkala, now located in Finland. He lived there in considerable want,

²³⁵ Ibid., II: 186.

²³⁶ Repin and Stasov, *Perepiska*, III: 197–98; Grabar, *Repin*, II: 135, 189. Her portraits, painted by Repin, are reproduced by Grabar, *Repin*, II: 178, 275.

²³⁷ Grabar, *Repin*, II: 190, 192.

²³⁸ As a matter of historical fact, the story of the insolent letter to the Sultan is apocryphal. Repin himself acknowledged privately that in reality the Cossack letter to the Sultan was "very correct": Repin and Stasov, *Perepiska*, III: 70.



Figure 16: I. E. Repin, Zaporozhian Cossacks replying to the Sultan, 1891.

confiding to a correspondent in 1925 that he froze in his dacha.²³⁹ Yet he refused offers to repatriate even after receiving a personal invitation from Marshal Voroshilov promising that all his personal needs would be taken care of,²⁴⁰ for he regarded the Bolsheviks as “cruel and barbarian.”²⁴¹ He even insisted that an article of his honoring Stasov which was to be published in the Soviet Union employ the old orthography.²⁴² He died in 1930. During the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939–40, his daughter who had joined him, fled to the interior of Finland. Kuokkala, located in that part of Finland that the Soviet Union had annexed, was renamed Repino.

7. V. I. Surikov

Vasily Ivanovich Surikov (1848–1916) was Russia’s premier painter of historical pictures: his seven substantial canvasses depicting scenes from Russia’s past earned him great popularity. Born in the Siberian town of Krasnoïarsk, Surikov was a descendant of the Cossacks who in the seventeenth century had conquered Siberia. His mother was illiterate. His father, a relatively well educated man, served in the local *zemstvo* court; he died when Surikov was a boy of 11, plunging the family into poverty. Surikov found a job as a scribe, but his ambition was to become an artist and so at the age of 21, with the financial support of a local patron, he made his way to St. Petersburg in the hope of being admitted to the Academy. To his disappointment, he failed the entrance exam which required him to draw from plaster casts with which he was completely unfamiliar.²⁴³ Undeterred, he enrolled in the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts to learn the skills required by the Academy, and the following year (1870) succeeded in being admitted as a full-time student. He made good progress and four years later won the small Gold Medal. He was sent to Moscow to help decorate the Church of Christ the Savior then under construction. He at once fell in love with the old capital city and its history.

As he told it, one day, when crossing Red Square, he had a sudden vision: he saw clearly in his mind the execution of the *strel’tsy* which had taken place there in 1698, in the reign of Peter the Great.

²³⁹) Minchenkov, *Vospominaniia*, 184.

²⁴⁰) Liaskovskaia, *Repin*, 464–65.

²⁴¹) Grabar, *Repin*, II: 193.

²⁴²) Repin and Stasov, *Perepiska*, III: 162.

²⁴³) Sergei Glagol, “V.I. Surikov,” *Nasha Starina*, 2 (1917): 67.