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Once upon a time in Russia Depictions of a Nation through Fairy Tales in the Russian Painting of the 19th Century

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Abstract

The exigency of a specified national identity was a pan-European phenomenon in the 19th century and especially distinct in Russia, due to its ambiguous position between the ideas of *Slavophilia* and *Westernism*. At the same time, fairy tales and folktales became the subject of fine arts in different cultural areas. Their depiction on large-sized canvases can be seen as a result of their contemporary reception as genuine national heritage. The concomitant ennoblement of the subject 'fairy tale' in the arts shows its utilization for the construction of national identity, alongside monumental historical or socio-critical painting. Folktales served as subjects for the more private and personal interpretation and demonstrated not only the artistic construction of national characters, but also the representation of the country itself. This paper will focus on specific elements for the symbolization of Russia in paintings of folktales.

For this purpose, the two versions of the "Three Tsarevnas of the Underground Kingdom" by Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1912) act as a good example for the embodiment of Russia in a folktale-themed painting. Both versions show the three *tsarevnas* of the folktale about "The Underground Kingdoms." Adapting the first painting of 1881 to the requirements of its commission for the main office of the Donetsk Railway Company Vasnetsov converted the kingdoms of the folktale to represent the richness of natural resources of the Donetsk area and Russia herself, symbolizing the wealth and pride of the nation through the *tsarevnas* and their costume. Adding a narrative moment in his second version of 1884 he includes the folktale and folklore as valuable assets.

Keywords

National identity; Russian painting of the 19th century; Viktor Vasnetsov; folktales and fairy tales; "Three Tsarevnas of the Underground Kingdom".

The exigency of a specified national identity was a pan-European phenomenon in the 19th century and especially distinct in Russia, due to its ambiguous position between the ideas of *Slavophilia* and *Westernism*.¹ These opposing intellectual movements contemplated Russian identity and the future of the country in comparison to western Europe. Therein, the *Slavophiles* held the view that Russia should focus on a course determined by its own history and character while the *Westernizers* (*zapadniki*) favored an adoption of western European ideas and developments.² At the same time, fairy tales and folktales became the subject of fine arts in different cultural areas all over Europe and Russia.³ Their depiction on large-sized canvases and their distribution through illustrations and reproductions can be seen as a result of their contemporary reception as genuine national heritage. The concomitant ennoblement of the subject 'fairy tale' in the arts shows its utilization for the formation of national identity, alongside monumental historical or socio-critical painting. Folktales served as subjects for the more private and personal interpretation and demonstrated not only the artistic construction of national characters, but also the representation of the country itself as seen by the artists.

The interest in folktales as a subject for Russian painting evolved from the artistic involvement with illustrating and painting scenes and characters of the traditional Slavic epic narrative poems, the *byliny*.⁴ Their heroes, mighty epic knights, fought in mostly fictional adventures against dragons, giants and other enemies to protect their country. Since these characters and stories were inspired by facets of Russian history, the *byliny* were seen as a source for genuine Russianness.⁵ One of the first paintings showing a scene of a *bylina* is "Sadko" (1876) by Ilya Repin (1844–1930).⁶ It depicts the Novgorodian *gusli* player Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom of the Sea Tsar, looking at a long line of beautiful mermaids, offered to him for choosing a new bride.⁷ Sadko wears a merchant's robe of old-Russian style, which refers to his other career. In the present tradition, the *bogatyrs* and *vityazes*, the heroic knights of the *byliny*, are more often associated with the creation of another painter.⁸ Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926) presented his first 'portrait' of an ancient Slavic knight in the late 1870s in his painting "Knight at the Crossroads" (*Vitiaz' na rasput'e*) after depicting several more or less historical battle scenes.⁹ Vasnetsov chooses to represent the *bogatyrs* as tall, strong, bearded men on horsebacks. They wear old-Russian armor and weapons and incorporate strength, invincibility and decisiveness.¹⁰ Vasnetsov was convinced that "folktales, songs and epics" show the "genuine nature of the Russian people" and therefore, they should be valued and preserved.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the artist also dedicated several

monumental paintings to folktales. His first canvases on folktales were for a commission of the Russian industrialist and patron of the arts Savva Mamontov (1841–1918) and were meant for the main office of the Donetsk Railway Company. Vasnetsov was free in the selection of the topics and decided to paint “The Flying Carpet” (*Kovër-samolët*, 1881) and “Three Tsarevnas of the Underground Kingdom” (*Tri tsarevny podzemnogo tsarstva*, 1881) as two of the three commissioned paintings.¹² While the first was meant to symbolize the great possibilities of means of transport, the latter refers to the richness of the resources and acts as a good example for the embodiment of Russia in a painting by using a folktale. Irrespective of the commission, Vasnetsov created a second version of the “Three Tsarevnas” a few years later, providing a more private interpretation of the depicted folktale. A comparison of both helps to reconstruct the artist’s intention and his reason to choose this particular folktale.

The analysis of specific elements for the symbolization of Russia in folktale-themed paintings suggests an approach of interdisciplinary nature, combining methodologies from art history as well as literary and ethnic studies. In the process, the literary studies provide the background to be able to identify different characters and tales. The subsequent iconographic analysis is complemented with literary and ethnic narratology, particularly through the use of the geographical-historical method, regarding the structured investigation of genesis and distribution of fairy tales. The cultural transfer theory provides a framework and useful addition to conclude on the reception of the painting by the contemporaries of the artist until now. Besides the examination of the paintings themselves, contemporaneous writings like letters, diaries or articles provide a supplementary insight into their genesis.

‘A tale of two paintings’

As mentioned above, the first version of the painting was part of a commission by Mamontov. As a director of the Moscow-Yaroslavl railway he also took part in the building of Donetsk railway. His contribution to the national economy as a merchant and industrialist allowed him to purchase the *Abramtsevo Estate*, located north of Moscow where he founded and hosted the *Abramtsevo circle*, a group of artists, such as Ilya Repin, Valentin Serov (1865–1911), Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910) and various others. Due to the idea of creating a genuine Russian style, the circle nurtured folkloristic design and collected old-Russian handicrafts, costumes and other samples from local villages to reproduce authentic folk art.¹³ Mamontov was able to win Vasnetsov as a member of the circle in the late 1870s, seeing his potential as a ‘national’ artist although he did not receive acclaim from critics, yet.¹⁴ At the end of the 1870s Mamontov’s company finished the construction of the railway in the Donetsk coal mining area and he assigned Vasnetsov to create three paintings for the main office of his Donetsk Railway Company.¹⁵ The painter suspected early on that Mamontov’s idea of involving him in the decoration of the office was rather an excuse for patronizing his work than an actual commission due to the questions and discussions about his own dreams and Mamontov’s offer to “paint whatever [he] like[s].”¹⁶ Still, for Vasnetsov the requirements of the commission – pretended or not – were to illustrate the awakening of the Donetsk Basin through the new railway. And since, he was free to choose the subjects of the paintings himself, he followed Mamontov’s lead and decided to create works with folkloric origin. In this context, the “Three Tsarevnas” were meant to symbolize in a metaphoric manner the wealth of the region and its resources. Later, Vasnetsov was proven right about his suspicion, because the other members of the company’s management found the idea of paintings in the office unsuitably and the three canvases were purchased by the Mamontov family, at the end.¹⁷

Not very fond of the first version, but still interested in the topic, Vasnetsov enlarged the dimensions of the canvas for his second painting, which he finished in 1884. In immediate comparison, the first version resembles more a study for the second one than a proper version of its own, since the slightly changed composition, the more elaborate details and the broadened format increased the quality of the depiction. In the early 1890s, the second version was acquired by the collector and friend of Vasnetsov Ivan N. Tereshchenko (1854–1903), a serious rival to Pavel Tretyakov (1832–1898) of Ukrainian origin who dedicated all his life to collecting art and patronage.¹⁸

‘A tale of three kingdoms’

Vasnetsov’s paintings were inspired by the folktale of the “Three Kingdoms – The Copper, the Silver and the Golden one.”¹⁹ The main narrative of the tale is about a young man searching for someone and finding three Underground Kingdoms with three *tsarevnas* (the Russian equivalent of a princess) who represent their kingdoms by wearing robes of copper, silver and golden color, respectively. The hero leads the *tsarevnas* out of the underground but is kept from leaving with them. After various difficulties and with the help of other folktale characters, he manages to return and marries the most beautiful of the *tsarevnas* at the end. Three different but similar versions appear in Alexander N. Afanasyev (1826–1871) collection of “Russian Folktales” (*Narodnye russkie skazki*) which were initially published in eight installments between the years 1855 and 1863 to become the first significant collection of Russian folklore.²⁰ Comparable to the Grimm Brothers’ collection of German fairy tales and folktales at the beginning of the century, Afanasyev gathered over 600 texts as a philological source for literary studies and thereby, documented different versions of a main narrative such as the tale of the “Three Kingdoms.”²¹ In Afanasyev’s first version, three brothers are sent by their parents to find a bride one after another. The two older brothers do not succeed when a dragon asks

them to push aside a stone to open a cave where they might find a bride. The third and youngest brother Ivan can fulfill the task and enters an underground world. There he meets one *tsarevna* after the other, first the one of the Copper Kingdom, then the one of the Silver Kingdom and at last the one of the Golden Kingdom. The *tsarevna* of the Golden Kingdom agrees to marry him and on their way back, the other *tsarevnas* join them as potential brides for Ivan's brothers. Waiting for Ivan's return, the brothers help to pull the *tsarevnas* out of the cave and, overwhelmed by their fear of their brother not allowing them to marry the *tsarevnas*, they cut the rope, leaving Ivan underground. After a long journey, Ivan returns and marries the *tsarevna* of the Golden Kingdom, while his brothers marry the other *tsarevnas*. In the second and third version of the tale, the three brothers are not peasants but the sons of the tsar. Their mother is abducted by an evil force and they go on a journey to rescue her. Unlike his brothers, the youngest *tsarevich*, Ivan, has to beg his father for his permission to leave and eventually enters the Underground Kingdoms where he finds his mother after encountering the three *tsarevnas*. His brothers are leaving him in the underground to gain the glory for their mother's and the *tsarevnas*' rescue. The contrasting statuses of the main character and the varying reasons for leaving home are the most striking differences of the three versions.²² Ivan's way back home is not identical as well but not essential for the analysis of Vasnetsov's creations.

'A tale of wealth'

Both paintings of the "Three Tsarevnas of the Underground Kingdom" depict the scene when the three *tsarevnas* of the folktale enter the world above. They are standing on a dark mountain at dusk, waiting. Their luxurious gowns let them stand out amongst the unwelcoming surroundings. The brilliant-colored dresses of the two *tsarevnas* on the left and in the middle of the paintings set them apart from the dark background while the third *tsarevna*'s dress blends with it. According to Mamontov's son Vsevolod, the *tsarevnas* symbolize gold, precious stones and coal, and therefore, the richness of the mineral resources of the Donetsk area and Russia herself.²³ Vasnetsov emphasizes the attribution of the *tsarevnas* through the decoration of their gowns. The *tsarevna* on the left seems cast in gold. She wears a garment of national style with folkloric pattern in a silken tissue on the basis of silver and gold threads. This so-called *aksamit* can stand by itself and 'hold' shape since the threads are similar to a thin wire.²⁴ Even though a dress of this fabric might weigh several kilograms, it is literally the embodiment of richness and luxury. In addition, her garment and her golden headdress are decorated with pearls and other precious stones. A variety of the latter decorate the silken dress of the *tsarevna* in the middle of the painting. Her dress of similar shape is more colorful with a floral pattern. She wears a precious crown adorned with gems and resembling the *kokoshnik*, a traditional Russian headdress.²⁵ The third *tsarevna* on the right wears a simpler dress with only a few decorative elements, which valorize the black silken gown using precious metal and diamonds. Instead of a crown or headdress, the *tsarevna* 'wears' a shimmering diamond at the top of her head.²⁶

For the second version, Vasnetsov chose to broaden the format of the canvas and to add the two brothers, who helped pulling the *tsarevnas* in the right lower corner. Their simple costume might suggest that Vasnetsov wanted to paint the first version of the tale and the peasant brothers. An alternative explanation could be that, since the *tsareviches* of the other two versions set out to rescue their mother, they might have chosen a less luxurious but more practical wardrobe. The long knife and the loosened rope support the narrative moment of the painting, linking the three beautiful girls more explicitly to the folktale. The changes in the composition place the third *tsarevna* closer to the other ones and dissolve the amalgamation of the dark dress with the background. This effect is supported by the changed formation of the mountains and the more precise differentiation of the mountain's color, provided through the opening in the newly arranged rocks and the additional mist.

Since Vasnetsov was not bound to any commission for the second version of the painting, the narrative element is more elaborate and the third *tsarevna* does not symbolize the richness of coal any longer, but might represent the Kingdom of Iron.²⁷

'A tale of Russia'

Painting the "Three Tsarevnas" for Mamontov's commission, Vasnetsov chose a tale about wealth and the richness which lies underground. In times of industrial revolution and underground mining and the increased interest in folktales, his reason to paint the tale of "The Underground Kingdoms" are evident. Still, his modifications of the tale for his own purposes are unmissable. Instead of a Golden Kingdom, a Silver and a Copper one, he includes the precious metals in one *tsarevna* symbolizing the most precious of them, gold, and adds other natural resources such as gemstones. A more detailed analysis of the third *tsarevna* will hopefully illuminate, if she represents the Kingdom of Iron in the second version of the painting, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Until the present day, the interpretation of her as the symbolization of coal, correlate the most with Vasnetsov's close relation with the working class and the peasants. Due to his composition of the painting and the position and the clothing of the *tsarevnas* Vasnetsov distinguishes the third one in the dark dress. The robes of the other *tsarevnas* are similar in shape, length and decoration while the third one has short sleeves and a less patterned tissue. In the second version of the painting the artist changed the position of her arms from a cross-armed into an open one, a choice which sets her aside from the

other *tsarevnas* even more. The last element which excludes her is the fact that she is the only one not holding a handkerchief. Following the medieval tradition of giving a handkerchief as a gift in the symbolic meaning of a love-token or a romantic promise, the *tsarevna* on the right might already have given hers to Ivan, the hero of the tale. According to this interpretation she would be his bride in the end, even though he chooses the *tsarevna* of the Golden Kingdom in the folktale. Interpreting the *tsarevna* of the coal (or iron) kingdom as the future bride of the hero is equivalent to stressing the resource she personifies as the most important of the three.

In his paintings, Vasnetsov succeeds to show the wealth of his nation not only by symbolizing natural resources in fabrics and gowns, but also in its folklore.

Short biographical introduction

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann studied Art History, Classical Literature and Classical Archeology at the University of Cologne, Germany, where she graduated with a master's thesis on early lunar photography in 2011. She assisted with the exhibition "The Moon" (2009) at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and Fondation Corboud in Cologne, which showed the impact of Galileo Galilei's "Sidereus Nuncius" (1610) and other scientific developments – like telescopes, photography, satellites and spacecraft – on the depiction of the moon from the 15th century until now. In 2011 she curated "Panopticon – The Secret Treasures of the Wallraf" at the same museum, an exhibition showcasing seldom seen artworks from the museum's storage in a salon hang. She is currently working as an independent art historian, guide and interpreter in Berlin, and writing her PhD thesis on fairy tales and folktales as subjects of the Russian painting of Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926) in the 19th and early 20th century in the context of cultural transfer associated with the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany.

¹ *Славянофильство* (*slavianofil'stvo*) and *западничество* (*zapadnichestvo*) in Russian. To improve readability Russian names and expressions will be translated in the text hereafter. A transliteration in brackets will be included, as well as the Russian original in notes. If not marked otherwise the translation is the author's.

² For more information on the debate on nationalism in Russia, see Andrzej WALICKI, *The Slavophile Controversy. History of a Conservative Utopia in nineteenth-century Russian Thought* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) or Frank GOLCZEWSKI and Gertrud PICKHAN, *Russischer Nationalismus. Die russische Idee im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Darstellung und Texte [Russian Nationalism. The Russian Idea in the 19th and 20th century. Description and Texts]* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rup, 1998).

³ The term 'fairy tale' is not an exact equivalent to the Russian 'сказка' (*skazka*), since there are no actual fairies in Russian folklore. Hereafter, the term 'fairy tale' will be used in the European and the term 'folktale' in the Russian context.

⁴ Russian: *былина*, pl. *былины* (*bylina*, pl. *byliny*). For more information see, for instance, James BAILEY and Tatyana IVANOVA, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁵ For a short introduction on the history of Russian folktales and *byliny*, see Patty WAGEMAN, "Once upon a Time... Words into Pictures," in *Russian Legends, Folk Tales and Fairy Tales*, ed. Patty WAGEMAN (ex. cat., Groningen: Groninger Museum, Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2007), 21–29.

⁶ Илья Репин, *Садко* [Илья (Il'ia) Repin, *Sadko*], 1876, oil on canvas, 322.5 x 230 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Printed in WAGEMAN, *Russian Legends*, 30.

⁷ The *гусли* (*gusli*) is the oldest Russian multi-string plucked instrument played by legendary bards. The *bylina* on *Sadko* gained additional popularity through Alexei Tolstoy's (1817–75) adaptation in a poem and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's (1844–1908) opera of the same name.

⁸ Russian: *богатырь*, pl. *богатыри* (*bogatyri'*, pl. *bogatyri*) or *витель*, pl. *вители* (*vitiacz'*, pl. *vitiazi*).

⁹ Final version: Виктор Васнецов, *Витель на распутье* [Viktor Vasnetsov, *Knight at the Crossroads*], 1882, oil on canvas, 167 x 299 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

¹⁰ Vasnetsov's most famous painting of *bogatyrs* shows three of them on a protective watch. Виктор Васнецов, *Богатыри* [Viktor Vasnetsov, *Bogatyri*], 1881–1898, oil on canvas, 295.3 x 446 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

¹¹ "[...] только в народной сказке, в песне или былине запечатлён проверенный веками, правдивый облик русского народа, [...]" ["[...] only folktales, songs and byliny have captured the genuine nature of the Russian people throughout the old times, [...]"] in Виктор М. ЛОБАНОВ, *Виктор Васнецов в Москве* [Viktor M. Lobanov, *Viktor Vasnetsov in Moscow*] (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1961), 44.

¹² Виктор Васнецов, *Ковёр-самолёт* [Viktor Vasnetsov, *The Flying Carpet*], 1880, oil on canvas, 165.7 x 298.7 cm, Nizny Novgorod Art Museum, Nizny Novgorod, and Виктор Васнецов, *Три царевны подземного царства* [Viktor Vasnetsov, *Three Tsarevnas of the Underground Kingdom*], 1881, oil on canvas, 152.7 x 165.2 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. The third painting of this commission depicts a battle of the Scythians and the Slavs.

¹³ For a comprehensive study on the *Abramtsevo circle*, see Элеонора В. ПАСТОН, *Абрамцево. Искусство и жизнь* [Eleonora V. PASTON, *Abramtsevo. Art and Life (Abramtsevo. Iskusstvo i zhizn')*] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 2003).

¹⁴ Momontov's son, Vsevolod S. Momontov (1870–1951), commented this by writing "Однако же в те времена талант Васнецова, открывшего совершенно новый жанр живописи, не был оценен тогдашними знатоками и любителями искусства [...]" ["However, at that times the talent of Vasnetsov, creating a completely new genre, was not appreciated by the

- connoisseurs and lovers of art.”]. See Всеволод С. МАМОНТОВ, “Воспоминания о художниках,” [Vsevolod S. Mamontov, “Memories about artists” (*Vospominaniia o khudozhnikakh*)], *Новый мир* [*New World (Novyi mir)*] 11–12 (1945): 267.
- ¹⁵ Николай С. МОРГУНОВ and Наталия Д. МОРГУНОВА-РУДНИЦКАЯ, Виктор Михайлович Васнецов. *Жизнь и творчество* [Nikolai S. MORGUNOV and Natalia D. MORGUNOVA-RUDNITSKAIA, Viktor Mikhaylovich Vasnetsov. *Life and Works. (V. M. Vasnetsov. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo)*] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962), 184.
- ¹⁶ “Путём расспросов и разговоров разузнав, о чем я мечтаю, - рассказывал художник, - Савва Иванович предложил мне, якобы для стен правления будущей дороги, просто написать то, что мне хотелось.” [“By asking about and discussing the things I dream of, - said the artist, - Savva Ivanovich offered me, as if for the walls of the future main office of the railway, to simply paint whatever I like.”]. See ЛОБАНОВ, *Васнецов в Москве*, 85.
- ¹⁷ The “Flying Carpet” and the battle scene were placed in the Mamontov family dining room and the “Three Tsarevnas” was given to Savva Mamontov’s brother Anatoly Mamontov (1839–1905). See МАМОНТОВ, “Воспоминания,” 267–268.
- ¹⁸ See МОРГУНОВ and МОРГУНОВА-РУДНИЦКАЯ, *Васнецов*, 192.
- ¹⁹ Russian: *Три царства — медное, серебряное и золотое (Tri tsarstva — mednoe, serebrianoie i zolotoe)*.
- ²⁰ Александр Н. АФАНАСЬЕВ, *Народные русские сказки, 1–8* [Aleksandr N. Afanas'ev (*Aleksandr N. Afanas'ev*), *Russian Folktales (Narodnye russkie skazki)*] (Moscow: Soldatyonkov et al., 1855–1863).
- ²¹ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Haus-Märchen, 1–2* [Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Children's and Household Tales*] (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812–13).
- ²² The three versions have the numbers 128–130 in Afanasyev’s collection. For a subsequent edition, see Александр Н. АФАНАСЬЕВ, *Народные русские сказки, 1–3* [Aleksandr N. Afanas'ev (*Aleksandr N. Afanas'ev*), *Russian Folktales (Narodnye russkie skazki)*], ed. Владимир Я. ПРОПП [Vladimir Y. Propp (*Vladimir IA. Propp*)] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdat. Chudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1957), vol. 1, 228–243.
- ²³ See МАМОНТОВ, “Воспоминания,” 268.
- ²⁴ Russian: *аксамит*.
- ²⁵ Russian: *кокошник*.
- ²⁶ See, for instance, МОРГУНОВ and МОРГУНОВА-РУДНИЦКАЯ, *Васнецов*, 190.
- ²⁷ According to МОРГУНОВ and МОРГУНОВА-РУДНИЦКАЯ, *Васнецов*, 190, the tale of the “Three Underground Kingdoms” is about a golden one, one that represents precious stones and an iron one. Unfortunately, they do not name the source of this folktale. Since there are no documents by Vasnetsov or his contemporaries, which support or disprove this interpretation, only future research might solve the question of unambiguous assignment.