

The Hunters at Rest: Vasily Perov's Response to Manet's Depiction of French Leisure

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WRITER'S COMMENT: As a history and art history major, I appreciated that this open-ended assignment allowed for the detailed study of a piece of art within its historical context. While the focus of the class was the paintings and sculpture of the European Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements of the latter 19th century, this paper provided the opportunity to look beyond these defined movements to analyze art created during 1850-1915 from any country. I came across the 1871 Russian painting, The Hunters at Rest by Vasily Perov, which seemed to resemble the more well-known French work, Manet's 1862 Luncheon on the Grass, which was discussed in class. With this initial similarity in mind, I tested my assumption that Manet inspired Perov by researching Perov's life and travels. The combination of visual and historical sources makes this essay not only an examination of two works of art, but a consideration of how artists influence each other.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Louisa Brandt's analysis of Vasily Perov's painting The Hunters at Rest does what the best historical writing accomplishes. Brandt sees clearly, looking across time to clarify the ways disparate cultural strands intertwined in the making of the modern world. In this instance her lens is that of art history, as is fitting for a paper developed in a class on the age of Impressionism (Art History 183b). She identifies an unrecognized iconographic precedent for Perov's beloved painting. Though usually interpreted as a candidly realistic treatment of Russian peasants, Perov's work is much more. She reminds us that it is actually a complexly constructed and mediat-

ed image. Brandt understands something the painting's original Russian audiences did not likely know. Hunters at Rest artfully quotes Manet's Déjeuner sur l'herbe, the most discussed artwork exhibited during Perov's time in Paris and the scandalous point of departure for modern art.

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The Russian power elite's belief in the superiority of French society and artistic expression in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the mimicry of French sources in Russian arts. During the eighteenth-century cultural revolution of Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725), Russia retained a fascination with French culture. The upper classes insisted on learning French and encouraged Russia to turn towards a "whole-hearted conversion to the norms of [European, and especially French] visual art."¹ During the reign of Empress Elizabeth (r. 1741-1762), Russia founded its Academy of Art, matching the name of France's own Academy, to give Russian artists the opportunity to receive a complete education from western European tutors.² By the nineteenth century, Russia's Academy closely emulated the French model by governing the types of "official" art and awarding worthy Russian artists scholarships for study in Paris. One such artist was the painter Vasily Perov (1834-1882), who studied in Paris during 1862-1864. Perov's stay in Paris coincided with the exhibition of one of the most significant French paintings of that decade, Édouard Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, which was first displayed in Paris in 1863. While Perov ultimately distanced himself from the developing French Impressionist movement, his own painting, *The Hunters at Rest* (1871), was clearly influenced by Manet's work as it is a variation on the recognizable depiction of a leisurely break from everyday activity. Differences in composition, technical details, and gender relationships, however, reveal each painter's particular aesthetic and social perspectives.

¹ James Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003): 89.

² George K. Loukomski, *History of Modern Painting: Russian Painting of the Past Hundred Years* (1840-1940), trans. the author (New York: Hutchinson & Co., 1945): 15.

Perov's own social status informed his views on the class struggles that he believed paintings should depict. Born before his parents married, Perov, under Russian law, was always considered an illegitimate child who could never enjoy the privileges and respect that stemmed from his father's rank as a baron.³ Nonetheless, Perov's father supported his son's artistic ambitions. He completed the program at Alexander Stupin's School for the Arts and attended the Moscow School of Painting and Sculpture from 1853-1862. While neither of these schools held the prestige of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, Perov certainly became a skilled painter. The Moscow School promoted "democratism," so Perov focused on the world of peasants, developing a traditional composition style to which he added his "penetrating attention to social and moral problems of reality."⁴ In 1861, Perov submitted his painting *Sermon in the Village Church* for consideration



Figure 1: Vasily Perov. *The Hunters at Rest* (original Russian: Охотники на привале), 1871, *The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia*.

before the Russian Academy. Even though its subject as a genre painting departed from the Academy's preferred style, he won the First Class Gold Medal and the accompanying six-year fellowship for studying abroad.⁵ He left for Paris in 1862, but he returned to Russia early in the fall of 1864 since he did not know

"the character and moral life of the people [in Paris, which made] it impossible to bring any one of [his] paintings to completion."⁶

The Hunters at Rest (Figure 1), completed in 1871, reveals Perov's interest in portraying the activities of the common man. Produced while he was employed as a professor at his alma mater, *The Hunters at Rest* is one

³ Marina Shumova, *Vasily Perov: Paintings, Graphic Works*. trans. Graham Whittaker (Leningrad, U.S.S.R.: Aurora Art Publishers, 1989): 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 8-9.

⁵ Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989): 6.

⁶ Shumova, *Vasily Perov*, 14.

of a series of three paintings that focus on outdoor pursuits of the middle- and lower-classes. On a canvas approximately four-by-six feet in size, three men in military-style clothing lounge on a brown-hued, autumnal landscape. The men on the right and left of the work face each other and are animatedly engaged in conversation, while the central third figure ignores his companions, staring directly at the viewer. Adjacent to the men are the products and tools of their labors, including shotguns and dead game in the left foreground, along with a hunting dog and a horn. The painting evokes the barrenness of the Russian landscape and the communal aspect of the male-associated activity of hunting. This work premiered at the first annual “*Peredvizhnik*” or “Wanderers” exhibit in St. Petersburg, which opened on November 28, 1871. The Wanderers, founded in late 1863, were a group of independent artists aiming to separate themselves from the stifling constraints of the government-run St. Petersburg Academy and to promote art that spoke more directly to the struggles of everyday Russians.

In France, the move towards paintings that challenged the subjects and sensibilities of the art establishment also began in the 1860s with Édouard Manet’s 1863 *Luncheon on the Grass* (Figure 2) becoming one of the best-known works of the fledgling movement. Manet submitted the painting for consideration in the 1863 French salon, but that year over 2,000 artists’ submissions—including Manet’s—were excluded. Rather, his work was displayed in a separate exhibition of the salon’s rejected works, created by Emperor Napoleon “in a sudden fit of liberalism.”⁷ Known as the “*Salon de Refusés*,” it pre-



Figure 2: Édouard Manet. *Luncheon on the Grass* (original French: *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Le Bain*), 1862, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

⁷ Pierre Schneider, *The World of Manet: 1832-1883* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968): 26.

sented some of the most well-known paintings in Western art history today, but at the time many visitors attended the show to ridicule these rejected pieces.⁸ Manet (1832-1883), a young artist trained at the studio of Thomas Couture instead of the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts*, felt, like Perov, that his work should demonstrate his love for his homeland; he therefore created works that touched on everyday scenes.⁹ In this first Salon de Refusés, he displayed three canvases, the most controversial being the nearly seven-by-nine-foot work, *Luncheon on the Grass*. This work, depicting four figures, elicited criticism for being “indecent” and “purposefully tr[ying] to scandalize the public.”¹⁰ Three of its subjects sit in the foreground: two men dressed as “high school students” of the time, and a nude woman who addresses the audience with her calm gaze. A fourth figure, in the background, is a clothed woman scooping water from a pond in what seems to be another picture plane behind the other three figures.¹¹ The left foreground depicts the luncheon basket atop a pile of gracefully rumpled women’s clothing. Without the trappings of a goddess, the nude female draws attention to her nudity through her extremely pale skin, central location on the canvas, and the “unmistakable element of the present,” which makes for a jarring juxtaposition to the clothed men.¹² While his work shocked the viewers of this secondary salon, Manet became the “reluctant revolutionary” of the later artists collective that became known as the Impressionists, which formed at the same time as the Wanderers in Russia.¹³ As such, *Luncheon on the Grass* became a model for other artists to study its composition, to expand on its technical methods, and to come to terms with a firm gaze confronting the viewer.

The organization of the figures and the similar settings of *The Hunters at Rest* and *Luncheon on the Grass* link the two works in basic design, but the less idealized setting and subject matter makes Perov’s work explicitly

8 Ibid., 27.

9 Ibid., 18.

10 Anne McCauley, “Sex and the Salon: Defining Art and Immorality in 1863,” in *Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*, ed. Paul Hayes Tucker (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998): 43.

11 Ibid.

12 Schneider, *The World of Manet*, 25.

13 Ibid., 8, 27.

representative of Russian society. The placement of the figures in the two paintings, with three figures seated on the ground in a semi-triangular arrangement, makes them visually parallel. Being the later work, Perov's painting can be considered a "creative copy" of Manet's piece—it alters, yet clearly references, its antecedent. This is not an uncommon mode in art as *Luncheon on the Grass* has often been compared to both Pastoral Concert (c. 1505-1510) by Titian or Giorgione, and Raphael's *The Judgment of Paris* (c. 1525-1530), works that Manet would have studied before creating his own pieces.¹⁴ As Perov's sojourn in Paris matches the time when Manet's was attracting both public criticism and the acclaim of his peers at the Salon, it seems likely that an art student such as Perov would have attended the current exhibitions and seen Manet's painting. In keeping with the idea of the "creative" versus direct copy, the hunters' poses do not match Manet's figures exactly, but rather Perov modifies them while retaining overall elongated triangular grouping. Importantly, Perov's sitters appear to be taking a well-deserved break from physical labor, while Manet's figures are languidly idling male students accompanied by their female muses. At the same time, while Perov's dog and the woman in the background of the Manet painting are both stooped over, their bodies creating gentle arches, the dog is also a resting worker while the woman is desultorily bathing. The bounty of the hunter's "lunch," the limp game, offers a darker reality than the voluptuous and perfect fruit spilling from Manet's basket, though both food groupings occupy the same lower-left quadrant of the paintings. Most strikingly, the portrayals of the landscapes reveal the artists' differing intentions in situating their figures. While art historian Paul Tucker asserts that Manet's "landscape . . . is generally assumed to recall the Île Saint-Ouen up the Seine from his family's property at Gennevilliers," its trees and ground-line, which are nearly subsumed in darkness, do not evoke a sense of a natural landscape but, rather, one of fantasy wherein Manet "deliberately excluded both depth and perspective" in the interest of rendering a verdant, manicured, and pleasing locale for a picnic.¹⁵ Perov's hunters, however, occupy

14 Ibid., 34.

15 Paul Hayes Tucker, "Making Sense of Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*," in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, ed. Paul Hayes Tucker (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998): 24; "Edouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass*." Musée d'Orsay. 2006. <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works->

a space void of such greenery as they sit in short dry grass surrounded by dormant bushes and tree stumps. Instead of expressing a lush landscape, Perov's creative copy of *Luncheon on the Grass* expresses the austerity Russian men might experience while hunting, making it a less romanticized representation of ordinary people's lives than an unbroken green carpet in the woods.

The technical details of lighting and perspective of Perov's *The Hunters at Rest*, compared with Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, underscore both the inherent reality of Perov's work and the ambiguity of Manet's painting. The placement of the sun in Perov's work is uncertain as the clouded sky obscures a sense of the time of day, but from the bright spotlighting on the figures—mostly on the left side of the canvas with shade on the right side—it can be assumed that the sun is facing them from the left. This treatment of the lighting remains “disconnected” from Perov's somewhat imperfect illumination of his figures' faces, but the meaning of a single source of light is clear.¹⁶ Manet's work, on the other hand, presents a complex triangle lighting system that fully illuminates the nude figure while leaving the nearby clothed men in darkness, with the woman in the water then getting her own lighting from above “giving the painting a discordant character.”¹⁷ This unnatural arrangement, while highlighting the important elements of the painting, continues the impression of otherworldliness. The absence of “both depth and perspective” in Manet's painting similarly creates a technical puzzle. The woman in the pond clearly is behind the foreground, but her size and the odd location of the water makes her look more like a creature of the imagination than a real person. Perov's painting avoids this stylized play on perspective by adhering to the conventions of a singular point-of-view throughout the painting, from the clear foreground to the blurred horizon line. While the unusual qualities of lighting and depth in Manet's work presage developments by later artists such as Cézanne and even the Cubists, Perov's documentarian adherence to the conventions of lighting and viewpoint creates a readily understandable locale.

in-focus/search/commentaire_id/le-dejeuner-sur-lherbe-7123.html?no_cache=1&cHash=48427e6bdb Accessed 23 November 2016.

16 Shumova, *Vasily Perov*, 26.

17 Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, trans. Matthew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2009): 61-2.

The male-only cast in *The Hunters at Rest* confirms it as a scene of labor and related conversation, whereas *Luncheon on the Grass* incorporates the female presence and gaze as a challenge to the male realm of an intellectual tête-à-tête. The assumption that a hunting party would not include a female follows the gender division common to many cultures that exclusively position women amidst domestic pursuits. Perov's three figures fit this ideal as they sit in their military-style costumes, smoking and not engaging in any "feminine" behaviors of food preparation as their dead, uncooked prey lays unattended beside them. *Luncheon on the Grass* instead shows the two males' space interrupted by a pleasant picnic basket overflowing with ready-to-eat fruit, an indication that perhaps their lunch has been made possible by a woman. This difference in narrative makes Perov's piece a more familiar display of traditional masculinity. In addition, the man furthest back from the foreground of Perov's painting who seems uninvolved in the conversation, provides a counterpoint to the intense interaction between the other two men, just as Manet's nude female is clearly disengaged from her companions' discussion. Like Manet's nude, Perov's third figure stares out at the audience under a full spotlight, oblivious to the other two men. His disinterest and leering smile disrupts the scene but does not seem beyond the bounds of realism and can therefore be ignored. Conversely, the disrobed woman in *Luncheon* is inescapable. Unashamed, she addresses the "widespread anxiety over the shifting social status of contemporary women, along with the difficulties of reconciling sexuality and public morality," as she simultaneously confronts and dispels notions of being a sexual object by being both naked and ignored by her male companions.¹⁸ By adding a desexualized female whose forthright attitude departs from the overall relaxed nature of the work, Manet's painting becomes charged with suggested, if ultimately unknown, meaning. On the other hand, Perov's painting, with its alignment with the conventions of a nineteenth-century male-dominated (and occupied) outdoor space, means that a slight deviation, such as an unexplainable smirk, represents no challenge to social order.

Created less than a decade apart, Perov's *The Hunters at Rest* and Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* can be analyzed as two versions of a moment of leisure that respectively underscore Perov's rejection of Parisian

18 McCauley, "Sex and the Salon," 54.

morals and inventive visual forms and Manet's aesthetic innovations. Without even knowing Perov's personal and educational backgrounds, a viewer of *The Hunters at Rest* understands Perov's commitment to depicting the common man in a decorous manner. Perov copies Manet only in a pleasing overall arrangement of figures. Manet's painting, on the other hand, reveals him to be an artistic revolutionary with his groundbreaking decisions regarding setting, lighting and perspective, and diversity of subjects. While frequently derided in its own time, this painting now represents the "crack in the history of art . . . so deep that pre-Manet and post-Manet painting would belong to irreconcilable worlds."¹⁹

Perov himself acknowledged this break by quitting Paris well before the end of his scholarship period. Despite elite Russians' love of France, neither he nor, as it transpired, Russian painters in general, were yet willing to be swept into the revolutionary world of mid-nineteenth-century French art. In the distinctly Russian narrative of art history, however, Perov can be seen as a harbinger of the fashionable and accepted form of visual culture. Even during Perov's lifetime, the emergence of populism by 1874 made works like his "r[i]se in general esteem" and, by the time the idealism of the socialist revolution of 1917 turned into an understanding of its drudgery, his art seemed aligned with "Social Realism."²⁰ Just as Manet's works are generally regarded as the origin of a new form of French art that spawned Impressionism and beyond, Perov and his fellow Wanderers remain important as harbingers of what would become Communist propaganda.

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19 Schneider, *The World of Manet*, 25.

20 Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, 69, 148-9.

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