

Russeries in the Construction of a European Exoticism

Author-s:

[Léopoldine CHAMBON](#) [1]

Abstract

Russeries, which were imagined by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, were one of the last forms of artistic exoticism conceived in eighteenth century France. The artist went to Saint Petersburg in 1757, and was presented at the court of Elizabeth I of Russia (1741-1762), who entrusted him with official commissions. Over the course of six long years, the painter-engraver steeped himself in the “Russian” atmosphere, and captured local everyday scenes from real life, along with portraits of men and women of the people, offering a partially descriptive study of native populations. Upon his return to France in 1763, he used these works in various artistic domains. While his works won him a certain renown, the fortune of his work suffered when this fashion ran out of steam at the end of the century. Occasionally revived in the field of art objects, the posterity of *russeries* has been minor, although the ethnographic dimension of Jean-Baptiste Le Prince’s work, which was novel in the register of exoticism, foreshadowed the scientific research of the nineteenth century.

Article

“*Russeries*” were born during the eighteenth century, after the first non-European exoticisms of *chinoiseries* and *turqueries*. It was a term used *a posteriori* to designate artistic expressions depicting the picturesque qualities of contemporary “Muscovites,” with the aim of drawing the interest of Western viewers unfamiliar with izbas, cabaks, and other singular cradles of Russian culture. This ephemeral genre in painting, a final expression of Enlightenment exoticism, was created by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (1734-1781) following a trip to Russia between 1757 and 1763. Armed with the instruction he had received in Paris in François Boucher’s workshop, this painter from Metz tried to present “Russian” dress and customs. It is generally considered that “*russeries*” were born in 1765, when Jean-Baptiste Le Prince proposed a “*Baptême russe*” [Russian Baptism] (Louvre museum), which opened the doors of the Académie de peinture et de sculpture for the painter. He also illustrated engraved plates for *Voyage en Sibérie* [Voyage to Siberia] (1768) by the Abbé Jean Chappe d’Auteroche, who made a scientific trip to Russia in 1761. *Russeries* were later broadly diffused through multiple series of prints by Le Prince published in the 1760s, as well as his paintings and tapestry cartoons.

Unlike *turqueries* or *chinoiseries*, which were often imaginary forms of exoticism, *russeries* enjoyed a choice emissary on site who could grasp the details of everyday life within a northern European space that was little-known at the time. While the exact itinerary followed by the artist is still a matter of discussion, it is certain that he visited major Russian urban centres such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Their capacity as commercial platforms prompted various populations to settle there, with the artist depicting them in drawings made from real life, which he used to create his engravings and paintings upon returning to France.

Le Prince was not content with presenting the mores of a relatively unknown country in his *russeries*, and endeavoured to present the many different populations residing within Russian territory, as well as those who were subjects of the Empire of Elizabeth I (1741-1762). This vast geographic control is

one of the distinctive characteristics of Russian exoticism. People from scattered populations went to Russia, which counted among its members Estonians, Finns, as well as the Chuvash people (from Siberia and the areas surrounding the Volga). As a result, the term “*russeries*” should be perceived in light of the political considerations that were active during the reign of Elizabeth I, and their viewpoint should also be connected to a broader interest for the customs of populations inhabiting the geographic spaces of Northern Europe and even Eurasia. These destinations also represented an alternative journey to the Grand Tour of Italy, which developed especially in the late eighteenth century.

Aware of the Westernization that was gradually spreading among the Russian elite, the artist preferred to turn his gaze toward the common people, who were supposed to retain the “authentic” character of a Russia seen as a distant country at the Eastern end of Europe. This was another innovative character of *russeries*, which Jean-Baptiste Le Prince developed brilliantly in his engravings. In fact, it was the choice of this iconographic approach which forced the artist to turn to the descriptive study of ethnicities and human groups.

Expressed in all domains of pictorial art (painting, art objects, tapestry), *russeries* had great success, and were the object of highly developed marketing. Its different formulas (a Russian mother rocking her child, peasants traveling on sleds, odd jobs) represented iconographic elements intended to charm the spectator’s eye. The mediums that were costly to develop depicted scenes in which the picturesque components were represented in precious materials, but without the concern for real-life detail which marked the first engravings depicting the customs and life of *Moskovites* [Muscovites]—“*Moskovites*” being the spelling used by the Abbé Jubé in the seventeenth century to specifically refer to the Russian population. Le Prince’s prints and drawings indeed show a will to observe and constitute the beginnings of a genuine ethnographic study. In concentrating his attention on *Muscovites*, the artist also sought to depict and explicate the different manifestations of traditional dress.

The posterity of *russeries* primarily stood out in the revival of Le Prince’s engraved plates, especially those taken from the series detailing popular clothing. Different collections, with content that was simultaneously ethnographic and descriptive, directly reproduced Le Prince’s works (*A Collection of the Dresses of Different Nations, Antient and Modern, Particularly Old English Dresses, After the Designs of Holbein, Vandyke, Hollar, and others, vol. III, London, published by Thomas Jefferys, Geographer to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, in the Strand, 1772*). Others reproduced them in part, combining his images with other original works (*Russia: Or A Compleat Historical Account of All the Nations Which Compose that Empire* by Johann Gottlieb Georgi (1776-1777), or were deeply inspired by them (*The Peoples of Russia, or a Description of the Mores, Habits, and Customs of Various Nations of the Russian Empire*, by the Count of Rechberg, 1815). This inspiration could still be found in the field of art objects, notably in the series of models proposed by Dominique Rachette, and produced at the Manufacture impériale de porcelaine around 1780.

Still, the phenomenon of *russeries* definitively ended around 1780, as Russia lost its “exotic” qualities within an increasingly enlarged Europe. Having emerged late on the French scene, artistic *russeries* had a very limited posterity. However, the emergence of a new enthusiasm for ethnographic research, along with the comparative study of the physiognomic types of ethnicities from Northern Europe, are in keeping with the logical line of descent of this artistic expression. Fairly superficial at the outset, in the end *russeries* were the prelude to this scientific research.

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