

The Sheremetevs and the Argunovs: Art, Serfdom, and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Russia

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation studies a case of Enlightenment art created in feudal conditions of servitude. The Sheremetevs, one of the richest and most powerful families in eighteenth-century Russia, had some of their hundreds of thousands of serfs trained as painters, architects, opera singers, and musicians. Two of these serfs, Ivan and Nikolai Argunov, became successful portraitists who painted a range of sitters from Empresses to fellow serfs. Tensions between social rank and individuality, already a preoccupation for eighteenth-century portrait painters, became particularly pronounced in this situation.

While recent scholarship has focused on the Argunovs' cosmopolitan influences, their paintings of fellow serfs and others of low rank are sometimes visually and iconographically distinct from their usual output. This category of portrait, this dissertation argues, should be considered within the context of the other artistic projects of the Sheremetev household. Despite strong Western European influences on the Argunovs, the painters were also exposed to extremely personal and local precedents. These include earlier portraits, garden prints, an atlas project, the Sheremetevs' many collections, and operas staged by the family's renowned serf theater. Working within this visual environment, Ivan and Nikolai Argunov painted their subjects in intricately allusive ways. Their portraits represented and negotiated the complications of serfdom in a setting where unusual social change was possible.

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Introduction

Now listen, friends, and I'll deliver my reproach
Against our "law." As far as I can tell,
It's just not possible that one person be
Serf to another. Whoever wishes to have a serf
Is neither wholly good nor bad, but a fool —
As though he thought he had the power
To be the father of another's children.

From "News About Russia," a poem by the anonymous serf "P," 1849 (translated by John MacKay)¹

I. Sometime during the evening of December 8th, 1815, two men began fighting loudly in the Sheremetev family's mansion in the Kitai Gorod neighborhood of Moscow. A butler went to investigate and found two brothers, Nikolai and Yakov Argunov, arguing with each other about a collection of prints.² Like the butler, the Argunovs were serfs belonging to the Sheremetevs, one of the richest families in Russia. The brothers were both portraitists who had been trained by their late father Ivan Argunov, who had also been a painter. The Argunov sons had been granted manumission years before, though they were still waiting for their official release from servitude.³ The butler asked what they were fighting about, and Nikolai Argunov told him that Yakov, his younger brother, had a portfolio of engravings that had been stolen from the Sheremetev family. In all, there were ninety-seven prints in the collection, including works after Raphael, Rembrandt, Poussin, Chardin, Greuze, and Rubens. This was a very serious accusation.

¹ John Kenneth MacKay, *Four Russian Serf Narratives*, Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 61.

² RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1617, list 1. This incident is discussed in Varvara Rakina, *Zhivopisets Nikolai Argunov* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2004), 113.

³ This was due to a complicated system of executors after the death of Count Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev in 1809. See Rakina, 97.

Serfs were not generally allowed to own property, though they often did in practice; the question here was not whether Argunov was permitted to have such a collection, but whether the prints had been stolen from his master's library.⁴ Household administrators began investigating and postponed Yakov Argunov's manumission. Over the course of several months, Argunov waited for a decision on the legitimacy of his collection — and whether he would live as a serf or a free man.

The matter of the print collection reveals how high the stakes of art could be in the Sheremetev household, not to mention the social complexities of a phenomenon that has been called the serf intelligentsia.⁵ A man had worked his entire life in servitude and now was facing serious repercussions because of his supposedly illicit collection. At the same time, this young, enserfed artist had been able to acquire a substantial and aesthetically rich collection of his own, and was on his way to legal and professional autonomy. The fight in Kitai Gorod, while it showed how important questions of art and ownership could be for individuals, was just one sign of what art could mean in the context of serfdom. The Argunovs and the butler, confronting each other in a Moscow palace, inhabited only an infinitesimal corner of the Sheremetev family's empire. Owning more than two hundred thousand serfs across swathes of Western Russia, the

⁴ For a discussion of the intricacies of property belonging to serfs and the gulf between theory and practice, see chapter five of T. Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 132-148. Dennison examines the Sheremetevs' village of Voshchazhnikovo in the early nineteenth century, concluding that serfs there owned land, houses, market stalls, and other forms of immovable property that was legally forbidden to them. Furthermore, the Sheremetevs actively enabled this practice, which benefitted themselves as well as their serfs (144-145).

⁵ This formulation is key to the work of M. D. Kurmacheva, who investigated the topic in *Krepostnaia intelligentsiia Rossii: Vtoraia polovina XVIII — nachalo XIX veka* (Moskva: Izd-vo Nauka, 1983).

Sheremetevs oversaw a small country's worth of people laboring in farms, manufactories, and domestic service in six major palaces and numerous other residences.⁶ Some Sheremetev serfs were rich, and a few illegally owned serfs of their own. These "capitalist serfs" made their money from cotton-printing workshops, metal works, and commercial trade. Hundreds of serfs worked as administrators, overseeing their comrades, balancing the family's immensely complicated ledgers, documenting the economic and domestic life of the household, investigating anomalies such as Yakov Argunov's alleged crime, and arranging punishments. Hundreds more were educated in the arts. They worked as architects, furniture makers, musicians, composers, opera singers, ballet dancers, and luthiers. Some were painters, and of these the Argunov family were the accepted elite.⁷

The Sheremetev household in the late eighteenth century was a rare situation within the broader history of servitude. Serfs were encouraged to portray themselves and the people around them, and to make art about the social conditions in which they existed as human property.⁸ The Sheremetevs, who commissioned most of the Argunovs'

⁶ The precise number of serfs owned by the family is a matter of debate since they had financial incentive to minimize this figure. Orlando Figes has estimated that they owned up to a million serfs by the end of the eighteenth century but this is not a number supported by more rigorous examinations of the Sheremetevs. Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 19.

⁷ For an account of enserfed artists, architects, and artisans working for the Sheremetevs during this period, see Vladimir Staniukovich, "Krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh: k 200 letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya Ivana Argunova 1727-1927," *Zapiski istoriko-bytovogo otdela GRM* 1 (1928), 131-178.

⁸ I am following the lead of Richard Stites and others in referring to serf artists as the "property" of their noble masters, although the concept of property changed significantly over the course of the century (in particular with the Charter of 1785, which granted and clarified noble property rights), as did the nature of serfdom as an institution. By the late

paintings, had tremendous power over their serfs and were able to influence the art that they made as well as nearly every aspect of their lives. The Sheremetev household and its accomplished serfs were also unusual in the Russian context. While many artistic professionals were serfs, few were as successful as the Argunovs. Furthermore, what could be called the norms of serfdom were sometimes defied in the Sheremetev household, where serfs could amass wealth and attain professional prestige and manumission. In this anomalous situation, a great deal of art was produced by and about serfs. Examination of this art depends on a close look at the workings of the Sheremetev household as well as at the broader historical setting.

Across Russia, the conditions of serfdom varied enormously. Although approximately half the population was enserfed at the end of the eighteenth century, laws governing the institution changed dramatically from decade to decade. For example, during Catherine's reign, it became more difficult to enter serfdom (such as through being taken in as an orphan or foundling), but serfs' rights to petition against their masters were harshly curtailed.⁹ It is difficult to make generalizations about the laws and customs regarding serf ownership even within the limited timeframe of this dissertation given the

eighteenth century, serfs could be bought and sold without land and were subject to an extreme form of social control. According to Aleksandr Lappo-Danilevskii, "the right to hold serfs, long related to slave-holding, came more and more to resemble a private property right" as Catherine increased the power of landlords, though the law was never completely clear on the matter. Aleksandr S. Lappo-Danilevskii, "The Serf Question in an Age of Enlightenment," in *Catherine the Great: A Profile*, ed. Marc Raeff (New York,; Hill and Wang, 1972), 282. Richard Wortman, *Visual Texts, Ceremonial Texts, Texts of Exploration: Collected Articles on the Representation of Russian Monarchy, Imperial Encounters in Russian history* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 336-337.

⁹ Isabel de Madariaga, "Politics and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Collected Essays," (London, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 124-125, 137.

changes that occurred. Furthermore, regulations could be misunderstood or ignored. Studies of Sheremetev serf administration suggest that the family generally enabled serfs to conduct business in ways that were not strictly legal; this benefitted the family financially.¹⁰ Terms of servitude ranged from hard labor and physical abuse to the materially comfortable existence of artistic professionals like the Argunovs. The boundaries between serfs and non-serfs were relatively fluid compared to Transatlantic chattel slavery. It was possible, albeit difficult, for some serfs to attain wealth, freedom, and even (in extremely rare cases) noble rank.¹¹

I have begun this project with a quotation from the anonymous serf poet called "P" who expressed the idea that serfdom was inherently paradoxical or nonsensical, even as it was practiced on a massive scale. These paradoxes were never more apparent than when serfs, supposedly intellectual and financial dependents in a paternalistic system, participated in the arts. Ivan Shuvalov, the president of the Imperial Academy of Arts

¹⁰ This is a major theme in Tracy Dennison's *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom*, which explores how property ownership played out in Sheremetev villages, which sometimes operated very differently from less liberal landlords' holdings. The Sheremetevs' rule bending also plays a role in discussion of their wealthy serf industrialists, e.g. in K. N. Shchepetov, *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885*, Trudy Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia (Moskva: Izd. Dvortsa-muzeia, 1947), 109 and *Iz zhizni krepostnykh krestian Rossii XVIII-XIX vekov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvenoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatelstvo ministerstva prosveteniya RSFSR, 1963), 21-26.

¹¹ Peter Kolchin compares chattel slavery and serfdom in *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987). He concludes that there are fundamental structural similarities between the two based on the need for forced agricultural labor and a paucity of willing workers. However, Russian geography and demographics meant that most serfs were less subject to the control (and abuse) of their owners than slaves were (a discussion of this idea in the context of Sheremetev villages can be found on pages 125-126). Kolchin does not treat what he calls "urban" serfdom in this book or the phenomenon of educated, socially mobile serfs like the Argunovs and the Sheremetevs' actresses. These were a very small group in comparison with the millions engaged in agricultural and industrial labor.

between 1757 and 1763, denied admission to serf students, commenting that un-free people could not participate in what he deemed the "free" arts.¹² A French nobleman who visited the Sheremetevs admired the skill of serf artists he encountered but worried that their Enlightenment would only "inform them of their own unhappiness."¹³ Many of the Sheremetevs' talented serfs were voluntarily freed by the family, suggesting that mastery of the arts led out of serfdom — even though successful serf artists were valuable to their owners in every sense.¹⁴ Serfdom and participation in Enlightenment art seemed to be irreconcilable in theory despite being prevalent in practice. This paradox necessitated complex societal, philosophical, and aesthetic recalibrations, which in some cases, I argue, were negotiated through visual art.

Portraiture made by serfs sometimes clarified difficult social scenarios and sometimes made them thornier. Writing of chattel slavery in Western Europe and its colonies, Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal have described the difficulty of portraying people in bondage and of reconciling theories of slavery with the goals of portraiture: "The body of the slave appears as the site of a nonsubject, of an entity without memory or history — the slave as pure bodiliness and immanence. Portraiture, on the other hand, insists on the face as a primary site of an imagined subjectivity, often

¹² Olenin would make a very similar argument in 1817. Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 288-289.

¹³ L.P. de Ségur, *Memoires; ou, souvenirs et anecdotes* (C. Hoffmann, 1829), 139.

¹⁴ Serfs freed by the death of Nikolai Sheremetev in 1809 include the surviving Argunovs, the stars of the theater troupe, and the family's most senior administrators.

at the expense of the rest of the body."¹⁵ In contrast, Sheremetev serfs found themselves subjects in all senses of the word. Despite being owned, they were sitters for modern portraits in an Enlightenment idiom.¹⁶ More importantly, they were the ones who composed and painted these portraits, which could facilitate extraordinary social change. A skilled artist could paint his way out of servitude.¹⁷ A portrait could bridge the gap between serfdom and nobility — and reveal the characters of people weighed down by either or even both poles of social identity. The Argunovs experienced certain advantages in the Sheremetev household: they were paid well, had access to Imperial art collections through the Sheremetevs' connections, and Nikolai and Yakov eventually were freed.¹⁸ And yet, attending the possibilities of social advancement was the threat of degradation,

¹⁵ Agnes I. Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7-8. This problem has been interrogated in Esther Chadwick, Meredith Gamer, and Cyra Levenson, "Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Britain," (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2014), an exhibition that questioned assumptions about portraiture while drawing attention to previously overlooked sitters.

¹⁶ There were a few cases where Black sitters sat for such portraits in Britain and its colonies. For examples, see David Bindman, "Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture," in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 71-88.

¹⁷ The socially transformative aspect of painting as profession was echoed elsewhere in Europe, with different stakes. James Thornhill became the first non-foreign painter to be knighted in England. This was a "significant moment in cultural independence," according to Jeremy Black, for a country that, like Russia, had depended on international stars. J. Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 211. Mastery of art rarely was a road to nobility in Russia but it did occasionally lead out of serfdom.

¹⁸ In a technical study of Nikolai Argunov's paintings, A. Vinner and A. Laktionov relate that his pigments were high quality and that he usually painted on a dense linen canvas made by serfs. A. Vinner and A. Laktionov, "Tekhnika portretnoi zhivopisi N. I. Argunova," *Iskusstvo*, no. 2 (1962), 58-60.

punishment, and continuing servitude. While elite artists did not often face such penalties, the Sheremetevs reprimanded, whipped, and exiled serfs regularly.¹⁹ Even the possibility of these punishments, along with the constant exploitation inherent in serfdom, meant that enserfed painters faced uniquely difficult working conditions.

This dissertation will examine the portraits of Ivan Argunov and his son Nikolai (Yakov's work from his time in servitude is lost), setting them within the visual environment of serfdom on the Sheremetev estates and the broader backdrop of Russian and European Enlightenment. I discuss them together not because they should be conflated either stylistically or biographically, but because they were each engaged in the project of painting the Sheremetevs' inner circle as the household changed over several decades. The Argunovs' most frequent sitters were elite Russians from the Sheremetevs to Catherine II to wealthy merchants. This dissertation, the first sustained treatment in English of these artists, will focus on the Argunovs' portraits of serfs and other lower-ranking people. Ivan and Nikolai Argunov, educated unsystematically by foreign and Russian painters, made portraits that mapped social status and paid tribute, at least on the surface, to the Sheremetev family. Reaching to European, Russian, and familial precedents, they painted complications of servitude, individuality, and identity that had no precedent in Western European art.

¹⁹ Even a reprimand could be deeply humiliating. According to Aleksandr Nikitenko, who argued his way to manumission in the early nineteenth century, the Sheremetevs' most talented serf composer became dependent on alcohol when it became clear he wouldn't be freed, and then drank himself to death when he was humiliatingly punished for drinking. "The combination of talent and slavery ruined [him]," wrote Nikitenko. A. Nikitenko and Helen Saltz Jacobson, *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 8.

My dissertation also looks at the ramifications of Enlightenment portraiture when it portrayed and was made by enserfed people. In Western Europe, painters and critics were beginning to recognize the power of portraiture to depict individuals. As Daniel Roche observes, the genre's priorities were gradually shifting "from a social to an individual logic ... an opportunity to reconcile the aesthetic ideal with individual nature."²⁰ The *Encyclopédie*, several editions of which were owned by the Sheremetev family, still emphasized both the representation of "la distinction des états & du rang" and "l'esprit en quelque sorte, & le tempérament d'une personne."²¹ This interest in both social status and personal character allowed for unprecedented collaboration between painters and sitters as well as an enlivening of portraiture as a genre, even for people of the highest ranks.²² In Russia, the tensions of portraiture — between public and private, natural and performed — were even more pronounced, particularly in the context of serfdom. One of the Argunovs' tasks was to paint highly ceremonial parade portraits of aristocrats and their ancestors, often in a deliberately archaizing idiom. Rank was supremely important, superseding individual likeness and personality. Many of these paintings were posthumous, adapted from prints or earlier works. Some Argunov

²⁰ Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, Harvard Historical Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 545.

²¹ F.B. Félice, "Portrait, Peinture" in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire universel raisonné des connoissances humaines: Plant - Pouz* (1774), 658.

²² This enlivening was not always well received. Vigée le Brun's 1783 portrait of Marie Antoinette in a chemise proved too intimate for a Salon context and had to be redone with the queen in a structured silk gown. See J. Baillio, K. Baetjer, and P. Lang, *Vigée Le Brun* (Yale University Press, 2016), 86-89.

portraits, however, ignore the signs of power and lineage entirely, showing sitters in novel private contexts.²³

The range of styles used by the Argunovs, sometimes even in the same year, is extraordinary. In the mid 1750s, Ivan Argunov painted the late Feldmarshal Boris Petrovich Sheremetev and the wife of his own neighbor, a bureaucrat named Cosma Khripunov (figures 0.1 and 0.2).²⁴ The two portraits embody the chasm between parade and private portraiture within the Sheremetev house. One is copied from an earlier work, awkwardly articulated, and intended to celebrate the accomplishments of a significant ancestor. The other appears to have been a personal project for Argunov and shows a woman who may have been his friend.²⁵ This is a modern portrait of contemplation, individuality, and private life. Nikolai Argunov also painted vastly different paintings within a short period, such as three portraits of Praskovia Sheremeteva in 1803-1804 (figures 0.3, 0.4, and 0.5).²⁶ One features soft facture and rich surfaces, while another is

²³ According to Gennady Vdovin, Ivan Argunov's portraits of the Khripunovs were a seminal moment in the development of eighteenth-century portraiture due to the decreased distance between subject and painter and what Vdovin calls "going into the house" of the sitter. Genadii Viktorovich Vdovin, *Persona, individulanost, lichnost: opyt samopoznaniia v iskusstve russkogo portreta XVIII veka*, Teoriia istorii iskusstv (Moskva: Progress-Traditsiia 2005), 52-53. Yakov Bruk also sees the relationship between subject and painter in this work as indications of a "new type" of intimate, realistic painting. Yakov Vladimirovich Bruk, "Ivan Argunov i krestyanskaya tema v russkoi zhivopisi," *Iskusstvo* 2 (1978), 53.

²⁴ N. G. Presnova, *Argunovy: krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*, ed. N. G. Presnova (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2005), 32-33.

²⁵ Selinova, 36-40.

²⁶ The dates of the cycle are not entirely clear. I follow Rakina's example in dating the coffin and pregnancy portraits to 1803 and the parade portrait to 1803-1804. Rakina (2004), 150-151.

painted with clashing reds and greens; Sheremeteva's face is harshly mottled, and rules of linear perspective are flouted. Yet another shows Sheremeteva dead in her coffin, starkly pale against a pitch black background. How could the same painters have produced such different styles within a few years or even months of each other?

One way to interpret the situation is to position the Argunovs as victims of circumstance, forced to paint conventional projects for their owners in a conservative idiom and free to experiment in a more modern style in their own time. This is a view expressed by Yakov Bruk, who has written that Ivan Argunov's tasks as a serf artist were creatively stifling, especially when copying was concerned.²⁷ Mikhail Alpatov's approach to Nikolai Argunov is similar, emphasizing the toll of serfdom on an artist whose paintings he termed diligent but uninspired.²⁸ To a certain extent, this characterization of serfdom is true. The power imbalance between "patron" and painter meant that the Argunovs and other serf artists were uniquely vulnerable: to humiliating punishment, to loss of status and attendant quality of life, and, even under the best circumstances, to an autocratic work environment where they were not allowed to choose what (and perhaps how) to paint.

Recent scholarship has proposed more nuanced interpretations of how the Argunovs' circumstances affected their art. Varvara Rakina considers "the harsh yoke of serfdom" to be a vague concept that oversimplifies the historical situation and does not

²⁷ Bruk, 54.

²⁸ Mikhail Vladimirovich Alpatov in Alpatov and V. A. Kulakov, *N. I. Argunov* (Moskva: Izobrazitelnoe Iskusstvo, 1975), 5-6. N. R. Kostikova mentions Nikolai Argunov's tendency to paint serfs with "human dignity" in an era when they were denied rights. N. R. Kostikova, "Nikolai Argunov (k 180-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya)," *Iskusstvo* 3 (1951), 73.

take into account the actual conditions of the household.²⁹ Rakina questions the utility of the "serf artist" label, pointing out that it carries "some condescending and derogatory" ("некий снисходительно-уничижительный") associations.³⁰ Her study of Nikolai Argunov, far from ignoring serfdom, focuses instead on what she calls "the problem of the client" ("заказчика"), a concept she acknowledges to be a fraught one for a serf artist. This is an approach that does justice to the intricacies of Argunov's social situation as well as to his paintings.

Scholars have often focused on the question of sources and influences when discussing the Argunovs. Both artists copied paintings and quoted other portraits in their own work. The act of emulation seems to have been a key part of Ivan Argunov's identity, since his self-portrait includes a stack of instruments used for copying, arranged (as Tatiana Selinova posits) in a stack that evokes his initials (figure 0.6).³¹ Like their archaizing work, the Argunovs' more derivative moments could be interpreted as a tedious side-effect of their servitude, a sign that they were not permitted or expected to compose creatively. But both Argunovs found ways to paint innovatively, especially when portraying people of low rank. Portraits of Anna Kalmykova, a Central Asian orphan, and Praskovia Sheremeteva are both formally distinctive while alluding to a complex web of antecedents. A primary goal of this project is to examine these portraits closely, identifying their sources and contextualizing them within the unique environment

²⁹ Varvara Aleksandrovna Rakina, "Nikolai Argunov i problema zakazchika v russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi kontsa XVIII - pervoi chetverti XIX veka" (Gosudarstvennii institut iskusstvoznaniya 2005), 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ T. A. Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973), 51.

of the Sheremetev household. These paintings are in some ways propaganda, maps of complicated social factors that reinforce a strict hierarchy. But at the same time, they demonstrate an interest in the features, physical and psychological, of the individuals portrayed. Far from Western Europe, the Argunovs were nonetheless keenly aware of what the Encyclopédie deemed tensions of portraiture and found ways to reconcile or at least acknowledge them in formally imaginative ways.

This is also a story about the Sheremetevs. As one of the richest private families of their time, they eagerly participated in newly cosmopolitan elite culture. Avid collectors, readers, and enthusiasts, they prided themselves on the artistic accomplishments of their serfs, devoting years of effort and extravagant sums of money to ensure their architects, painters, and opera troupes were among the best in Russia. The Sheremetevs appear to have considered themselves benevolent owners of serfs and commissioned art that cast them in this light, even as they exploited hundreds of thousands of people who lived in servitude.³² The family was thrown into turmoil when Count Nikolai Sheremetev secretly married his long-time mistress, Praskovia Kovaleva, who had been the star of the family's serf opera. By freeing her, making their relationship official, and ennobling her, Sheremetev defied convention and raised doubts about the legitimacy of the couple's son. Nikolai Argunov's most important project was a portrait

³² The most direct treatment of this theme was a series of operas commissioned in the 1780s about Sheremetev serfs in a pastoral vein. These include "Coachman of Kuskovo" (which premiered in 1781), "The Nymph of Kuskovo" (1782), and "The Hunt from Kuskovo" (1785). See Lia Aleksandrovna Lepskaya, *Repertuar krepostnogo teatra Sheremetevykh: katalog pies* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennyi tsentralnyi teatralnyi muzei im. A. A. Bakhrushkina, 1996), 130-131.

cycle meant to legitimate Praskovia Sheremeteva while hinting at her true origins and identity.

II. Methodology and sources

The methodology of this project involves a close visual reading of the Argunovs' portraits and other examples of art the Sheremetevs commissioned or owned. A recurring theme throughout the Sheremetevs' artistic life and that of their serfs is that of identity and how it is understood and performed. This is a discussion that has been influenced by Russian literary scholarship, especially by Yuri Lotman and the subsequent scholars who responded to his semiotic reading of life in the eighteenth century.³³ Lotman wrote primarily about the eighteenth-century elite and the performative aspects of noble life in Russia. Recently, Michelle Marrese and other scholars have critiqued Lotman's focus, claiming that the aristocracy were not quite as self-consciously alienated as Lotman claimed.³⁴ Marrese has also drawn attention to the narrowness of Lotman's scope, pointing out that he was interested almost exclusively in the aristocratic male experience at the expense of women, who nonetheless participated actively in the cultural life of this period. My topic represents a point of encounter between these two not entirely separate ways of examining the eighteenth century. The Sheremetev household contained serfs

³³ E.g. I. U. M. Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Russian Eighteenth-Century Culture," in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. I. U. M. Lotman, Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, and Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1984) and "The Theater and Theatricality as Components of Early Nineteenth-Century Culture" in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. I. U. M. Lotman, Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, and Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1984).

³⁴ M.L. Marrese, "'The Poetics of Everyday Behavior' Revisited: Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble Identity," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, no. Fall (2010), 701-739.

who performed versions of serfdom and nobility, especially in the opera troupe. Actresses played fictional serfs on stage while fighting their way upward through the social hierarchy, with the most successful attaining freedom and even (in Kovaleva's case) nobility. At the same time, Sheremetev family members engaged with Western European ideas and manners both thoughtfully and superficially.

My approach is also influenced by current scholarship concerning Western Europe and its colonial empires, as well as the visual culture of the Enlightenment in contexts of subjugation. To cite a geographically distant example, Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn have examined the "hybrid" art of Colonial Spanish America in ways that acknowledge the problems attending the term.³⁵ Despite the heterogeneous aesthetic lineage of art, objects, and architecture, divisions between Hispanic and pre-Hispanic categories were not stable. The vitality of indigenous culture did not depend on the continued use of archaic forms, nor did Spanish colonizers necessarily cleave to European precedents. The Sheremetev household, and indeed eighteenth-century noble culture in general, also represented a kind of hybrid of European and Russian influences, but the lines between the two were not always clear. The Argunovs have been positioned variously as cosmopolitan, urban painters who were most at home in the Hermitage and oppressed serfs with an interest in "folk" or "popular" forms. Neither fully describes their social position or explains the strange formal qualities of their most compelling work. I take an approach that examines both sides of the Argunovs' artistic lineage, keeping in

³⁵ Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (2003), 5-35.

mind the fundamental instability of such categories and the powerful social forces that defined them.

While there has been very little English-language scholarship about the Argunovs, I have depended on a wealth of Russian sources. The Soviet era often necessitated ideological conclusions that were less than subtle, but art historians and archivists produced rigorously researched monographs that tied together vast numbers of manuscript sources that illuminate the Sheremetevs' and the Argunovs' situations.³⁶ Tatiana Selinova's book about Ivan Argunov is a lucid examination of his entire career, clarifying and contextualizing both his paintings and what can be confirmed of his biography.³⁷ More recently, Varvara Rakina's dissertation and monograph about Nikolai Argunov and Natalia Presnova's research concerning the Argunovs and the Sheremetevs' portrait collection are excellent treatments of the subject in Russian.³⁸ Rakina's work in particular approaches the question of serfdom with subtlety, acknowledging the difficulties it could cause an artist by examining specific incidents documented in the archive rather than by making generalizations. Douglas Smith's massive research project

³⁶ Detailed bibliographic information for each painting can be found in Natalia Presnova's *Argunovy: krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh* as well as her catalog of the Sheremetevs' portrait collection, *Portretnoe sobranie grafov Sheremetevykh*.

³⁷ Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802*.

³⁸ Varvara Rakina, *Zhivopisets Nikolai Argunov* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2004); Varvara Rakina, "Nikolai Argunov i problema zakazchika v russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi kontsa XVIII - pervoi chetverti XIX veka" (Gosudarstvennii institut iskusstvovedeniya 2005), Presnova (with I. E. Lomize), *Argunovy: krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*.

on the Sheremetevs has provided the clearest picture of the family's history with a special emphasis on the relationship between Nikolai Sheremetev and Praskovia Kovaleva.³⁹

In terms of primary sources, I have relied on manuscripts from several archives: The Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), the Russian State Archive of Literary Arts (RGALI), the Moscow Museum Ostankino Estate Archive (MMUO), and Les Archives Nationales de France. With the exception of the last, these collections contain important paperwork from the Sheremetev household from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, from Argunov-era manuscripts to compilations organized by Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev in the late nineteenth century that relate to his ancestors, with a particular focus on the lives of his grandparents, Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev and Praskovia Ivanovna (Kovaleva) Sheremeteva. I have also depended on scholars' compilation and analysis of Sheremetev archival documents, including *Teatry Sheremetevykh* (The Theaters of the Sheremetevs) by Nadezhda Yelizarova, *Repertuar krepostnogo teatra Sheremetevykh* (Repertoire of the Sheremetevs' Serf Theater) by Lia Lepskaya, and *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885* (Serfdom in the Sheremetev Allotments, 1708-1885) by Konstantin Shchepetov.⁴⁰ The works mentioned above by Selinova, Presnova, Rakina, and Smith, which all use extensive manuscript sources, were also extremely helpful in

³⁹ Douglas Smith, *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); *Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

⁴⁰ N. Yelizarova, *Teatry Sheremetevykh* (Moskva: Izd. Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia, 1944); Lia Aleksandrovna Lepskaya, *Repertuar krepostnogo teatra Sheremetevykh: katalog pies* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennyi tsentralnyi teatralnyi muzei im. A. A. Bakhrushkina, 1996); K. N. Shchepetov, *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885*, Trudy Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia (Moskva: Izd. Dvortsa-muzeia, 1947).

approaching the vast amount of extant archival material. Memoirs of Alexander Nikitenko, a former Sheremetev serf who was freed in the nineteenth century, add a rare first-hand account from a serf of approximately this period.⁴¹

What my dissertation adds to the existing body of scholarship is an art historical look at select paintings in the context of the Sheremetev household, mostly those of serfs and other non-nobles. These paintings, for the most part, simply look different from the Argunovs' portraits of aristocrats and wealthy sitters. Part of their visual difference can be attributed to what Bruk and Vdovin might term "intimacy," related to the act of painting an acquaintance from life rather than making a deliberately archaizing parade portrait from an old engraving. This would explain, for example, the gulf between the portraits of Khripunov's wife and Feldmarshal Boris Sheremetev mentioned earlier. But other paintings are more elusive. Nikolai Argunov's portrait cycle of Praskovia Sheremeteva is radically unlike his other work and the conventions of his era. Ivan Argunov's portrait of a woman in peasant costume, perhaps the serf actress Anna Buyanova, is also a departure from his usual habits and is a rare example of authentic folk dress in portraiture from this period. How did such anomalous portraits come to be? The answer has to do with social factors to a certain extent, but also the visual environment in which the Argunovs lived and worked.

The best writing about the Argunovs avoids simplistic narratives about class conflict. Rakina, Presnova, and Selinova in particular are very precise both about the archival record (its revelations and limitations) and about the Argunovs' sources. Each

⁴¹ Nikitenko and Jacobson; *The Diary of a Russian Censor* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975). Very little writing from the Argunovs survives, with the exception of a few letters to the Sheremetevs that were kept in the family archives.

artist could be called cosmopolitan. They had great success as portraitists, were exposed to Imperial collections, and Ivan Argunov had especially strong ties to the artistic establishment of St. Petersburg, though he was eventually excluded from the Academy. Rakina is dismissive of attempts to position Nikolai Argunov as an artist who would have been subject to "folk" influences.⁴² And yet, without denying the cosmopolitanism of the Argunovs, they were required to paint subjects and situations rarely encountered by other urban, professional painters. It is not so strange that they should paint in one way for their elite clients in St. Petersburg or Moscow and in another way, with different references, when portraying other enserfed householders.

The influence of Western European painters on the Argunovs has been explored in depth. For example, Selinova describes how Ivan Argunov borrowed elements from Rigaud for portraits of Ekaterina Lobanov-Rostovsky, Boris Sheremetev, and Anna Petrovna Sheremeteva; alluded to Nattier for a portrait of Pyotr Sheremetev; and used Tocqué's portrait of Empress Elizabeth as a model for a painting of Catherine.⁴³ Rakina convincingly discusses the influence of Dutch paintings on a young Nikolai Argunov, who would later copy paintings in the Hermitage.⁴⁴ The Argunovs were adept at borrowing elements of other paintings — particularly ceremonial settings — for their portraits of the elite. In this dissertation, I will look at the more personal and local influences on the Argunovs' paintings of serfs and outsiders. I argue that Nikolai

⁴² Rakina (2005), 44.

⁴³ Selinova, 26, 84, 119-120, 122-123. Selinova's chapter on "historical portraits" is a fascinating look at how Argunov used earlier work to inform his parade portraiture.

⁴⁴ Rakina (2004), 31-33.

Argunov was influenced by Petrine conventions when portraying Praskovia Kovaleva, including the Sheremetevs' archaizing portrait gallery. I examine Ivan Argunov's painting of Anna Kalmykova, a Kalmyk ward of the Sheremetev family, and how it rhymes with his portraits of the Sheremetevs' biological children. Portraits of actresses by both artists relate not only to paintings of other performers, but to the texts of the theater.

By closely examining the citations, allusions, and references contained within the Argunovs' work, I hope to present not just a new angle on the Argunovs' paintings, but an account of how art functioned in a noble household (that was also, by necessity, a serf household). I cannot claim to have written a comprehensive treatment of the Argunovs' careers, but I hope that by introducing their paintings that touch on serfdom to an Anglophone audience, I can include them in a broader discussion about Enlightenment, subjugation, and the changing role of portraiture in the long eighteenth century. Russian art from this period has long been regarded as marginal, a distant echo of European innovations. Even in the eighteenth century, an attribute that Rousseau called "a genius for imitation" dogged foreign perception of Russia.⁴⁵ My aim in this dissertation is not to position the Argunovs as inventors of modern visual idioms but as shrewd viewers and portraitists nonetheless, who painted in sophisticated ways despite and sometimes because of their unusual circumstances.

III. Organization and Scope

This project is relatively narrow in scope, a case study of art under servitude. It addresses portraiture by Ivan and Nikolai Argunov from the 1750s through the first

⁴⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* (Dover Publications, 2012), VIII: The People.

decade of the nineteenth century, as well as other art commissioned or collected by the Sheremetev family during this period. These were the most fruitful years of the family's artistic endeavors, which included ambitious theatrical and operatic troupes and the active years of the Argunovs (though Nikolai Argunov continued to paint after he was freed in 1816). This period also saw the completion of the Sheremetevs' two major estates outside of Moscow, Kuskovo (figure 0.7) and Ostankino (figure 0.8). As one of the richest families in eighteenth-century Russia, the Sheremetevs participated in the vibrant arts scene under Elizabeth and Catherine. Their private opera rivaled any other troupe in Russia, either serf-run or public, and their palaces were noteworthy landmarks.

During the eighteenth century, the Argunovs were arguably the most talented and successful serf portraitists. Only two other serfs of this period — Mikhail Shibanov and Fyodor Rokotov — had comparable careers, and Rokotov was freed early in his life. The Argunovs' portraits make excellent material for close examination of Enlightenment-era painting within the context of serfdom due to their obvious skill, their range of sitters, and the quantity of their paintings that still exist. The Sheremetevs' Moscow estates, designed for public festivals and displays of the arts in many contexts, have been preserved in good condition. Their rooms have been reconstructed with sensitivity to eighteenth-century inventories, and some of the Argunovs' paintings can still be found in situ. Although very few documents survive from either Argunov, the Sheremetevs kept voluminous records of their household paperwork. While there are many frustrating gaps, enough documentation exists to piece together information about the Argunovs' quality of

life, their subjects, and details of some of their projects.⁴⁶ All of these factors make analysis of the Argunovs' work possible, albeit incomplete and with many open questions.

The first chapter, "Family Portraits," examines the Argunovs' paintings of serfs and other lower ranking people, focusing on Anna Kalmykova, a Kalmyk child adopted by the Sheremetev family, and Praskovia Kovaleva, a serf opera singer who eventually married Nikolai Sheremetev and became a countess. I will discuss the ways in which each artist depicted anomalous social scenarios, mining contemporary (and, in Nikolai Argunov's case, Petrine) precedents in order to contextualize their sitters. In both cases, the Sheremetevs favored the Argunovs over prestigious foreign portraitists, suggesting that a lifetime of close looking within the Sheremetev household allowed the Argunovs to depict difficult social situations subtly and astutely.

Chapter two, "Through a Little Window," re-contextualizes the Argunovs' theatrical portraits and other paintings of Sheremetev actors. The Sheremetevs' theater, which consisted of opera singers, dancers, musicians, and choruses, was among the best in Russia and was attended by local nobles, Catherine and Paul, and foreign royals and diplomats. Star actresses were paid fairly well and were eventually manumitted. The

⁴⁶ The gaps in the Sheremetevs' archive echo a problem in the study of Transatlantic slavery, what Saidiya Hartman has called the "silence in the archive." Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), 3. Hartman describes the extant archive as "inseparable from the play of power" that killed and tortured slaves and "exonerated" their enslavers. *Ibid.*, 10-11. While the violence that Hartman recounts is much more extreme than the punishments used by the Sheremetevs, the family's paperwork was part of an administrative apparatus that kept people in bondage, monitored and surveilled them, and failed to preserve the first-hand accounts of serfs caught up in an exploitative system. I am grateful to Meredith Gamer for pointing me towards Hartman's article. The Argunovs' paintings can, to a certain extent, be considered a first-hand text of serfdom, albeit one that was subject to similar problems as the archive.

chapter examines three portraits of these actresses (by Ivan Argunov, Nikolai Argunov, and a pastellist, possibly Johann Bardou) and how they may have helped their subjects emulate elite behavior, easing their way toward freedom. Scholarly understanding of Russian aristocrats from this period has long focused on questions of performance, and I posit that these serf actresses, as part of a larger self-fashioning project, posed in ways that made clear their sophistication and understanding of theatricality. The Argunovs, meanwhile, understood how versatile and powerful portraiture could be and how professional mastery could lead to manumission. The chapter also examines as a counterpoint Nikolai Argunov's portrait of Ivan Yakimov, an illegitimate Sheremetev child who was also a serf actor.

"The Shabby Camera Obscura," chapter three, discusses space and landscape within various Sheremetev art projects as well as the general avoidance of linear perspective or detailed backgrounds in the Argunovs' work. I argue that the Sheremetevs' interest in depictions of their land was inextricably related to their ownership of serfs. Serfs participated in the family's two major landscape projects, a series of garden prints drawn by Mikhail Makhaev and engraved by Pierre Laurent, and a hand-painted atlas of family land holdings. Although their contributions were anonymous, serfs assisted in the draughting process using viewing tools, such as a camera obscura, usually intended for elite enjoyment. Both projects included conciliatory representations of serfs and were related to the Sheremetevs' interest in administration and generally in surveilling and controlling their human property. Meanwhile, the Argunovs were engaged in painting portraits with dark, indistinct backgrounds or generic parade settings. I propose that this

is related to their tendency to work from other paintings, contextualizing their sitters not in concrete settings but in the space of prior portraits.

The fourth and final chapter, "The Fight in Kitai Gorod," focuses on questions of ownership and collecting. The Sheremetevs amassed huge amounts of art and consumer objects, from paintings to precious stones. They also owned hundreds of thousands of people and occasionally put them on display, onstage in the theater or portrayed in paintings on their walls. A few Sheremetev serfs, including the Argunovs and Tatiana Shlykova, were also able to have their own collections. The chapter explores the connotations of ownership in the context of serfdom: how the Sheremetevs conceptualized their property, human and otherwise, and how accruing and displaying valuable possessions was an important activity for serfs who wished to move upwards socially and attain independence.

The conclusion examines the after-life of the Argunovs' paintings, rediscovered by Sergei Diaghilev in the early twentieth century, and the Sheremetevs' legacy. Focusing on Diaghilev's interest in the Argunovs, various Soviet attitudes toward the preservation and display of Sheremetev artwork, and Anna Akhmatova's connection to the Sheremetevs, I conclude by considering the many interpretations attached to these paintings during the last century.

IV. A Brief Summary of the Sheremetev and Argunov Families in the Eighteenth Century

The Sheremetev family rose to prominence under Peter the Great. Feldmarshal Boris Petrovich Sheremetev (1652-1719) led campaigns in The Great Northern War and served as a diplomat in Western Europe, receiving the title of Count. Boris' heir Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetev (1713-1788) performed state service and used his vast wealth to

build and remodel palaces and accumulate artwork. His marriage to Varvara Alekseevna Cherkasskaya (1711-1767) in 1743 greatly increased his wealth; together they owned approximately 200,000 serfs, mansions in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and the Moscow region, and many smaller properties. The couple had three children who survived until adulthood: Nikolai Petrovich (1751-1809), Anna Petrovna (1744-1768), and Varvara Petrovna (1750-1824). Nikolai Sheremetev preferred devoting himself to developing his family's serf theater to civil service and built a new palace on his family's estate at Ostankino. He caused a scandal by marrying Praskovia Ivanovna Kovaleva (1768-1803), the enserfed prima donna of the family opera, in secret and successfully campaigned to have the union and the resulting child (Dmitri Nikolaevich Sheremetev, 1803-1871) legitimated.

The Argunov family were serfs who originally belonged to Varvara Cherkasskaya's family and were part of her dowry when she married Pyotr Sheremetev in 1743. The family included painters and architects. Ivan Petrovich Argunov (1729-1802) was the nephew of the Cherkasskys' steward and showed early aptitude for drawing. He studied with the German painter Georg Grooth, including a stint at the chapel at Tsarskoe Selo, completing the only religious paintings of his career. Returning to the Sheremetevs' household, he painted a Cleopatra after Cagnacci before settling into a career of portraiture that would last thirty years. Although this dissertation concentrates on Argunov's paintings of fellow serfs and of the Sheremetevs, he was well known as a portraitist and painted many members of Russia's noble families. A painting of Catherine, based on Tocqué's portrait of Elizabeth, was well received by the Empress. Writing to Pyotr and Varvara Sheremeteva, Argunov reported that he had heard she said "что

работа и идея хороша и в лице сходство есть" ("that the execution and the concept were fine and that there was a likeness to the face").⁴⁷ Argunov had a hand in training the painters Anton Losenko, Ivan Sablukov, and Kyrill Golovachevsky in the 1750s. This was before the establishment of the Academy of Arts, when painters were trained in connection with the Chancellery; the arrangement with Argunov was communicated in an Imperial decree.⁴⁸ The situation demonstrates the esteem the Argunov must have commanded in official circles, though his teaching in this capacity concluded around the time that the Imperial Academy of Arts was founded. Being a serf, he was not officially affiliated with the new Academy, which would allow its successful students and professors entry into the system of civil service and social advancement laid out in the Table of Ranks. Pyotr Sheremetev relied on Argunov not just to paint portraits, but to advise him about artistic matters in general, for example bringing him to an auction house along with Nikolai Sheremetev to look at potential acquisitions.⁴⁹ Argunov seems to have ceased painting in the late 1780s, around the time that Pyotr Sheremetev died. Nikolai Sheremetev assigned him a full-time administrative position in Moscow in which he worked until his death in 1802. His sons Nikolai and Yakov continued their work as painters, while Pavel was an architect.

Nikolai Ivanovich Argunov (1770-1828) had taken over as head portraitist in the late 1780s after painting a pair of Dutch-influenced peasants that impressed Nikolai

⁴⁷ Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802*, 83-84. It was Prince Trubetsky who delivered the painting and gauged Catherine's reaction, not Argunov.

⁴⁸ For more on Argunov's pedagogy, see Selinova 148-164.

⁴⁹ K. V. Malinovsky, *Istoriya kollektionirovanniya zhivopisi v Sankt-Peterburge v XVIII veke* (Sankt-Peterburg: Kriga, 2012), 315.

Sheremetev. Although little is known of his education, it seems that he trained with his father. Nikolai Argunov painted Sheremetev householders, both noble and enserfed, and other prominent Russians including Tsar Paul (though the emperor did not sit for the portrait, just as his mother Catherine did not sit for Ivan Argunov). Although portraiture was his main occupation, he also made miniatures, copied history paintings including Angelica Kauffmann's "Achilles Discovered by Ulysses" (to whose composition he made some changes), and drew the coat of arms for the Sheremetev family's personal atlas. He taught the miniaturist Mikhail Zatsepin and Ivan Melnikov. In the latter years of his servitude, Argunov was assigned household duties that appear to have inhibited his ability to paint. Nevertheless, he and Yakov were freed in 1809 after the death of Nikolai Sheremetev. Officially manumitted in 1816, Nikolai Argunov became an Academician. Although relatively few of his paintings survive from this period, he continued to paint portraits of (usually illustrious) sitters. He died unmarried and childless in 1828.⁵⁰ Yakov Argunov (born 1784), cleared of the theft of the prints, was freed some months after his brother and went on to teach art at a Moscow gymnasium, completing a series of historical portrait prints as well as a few paintings later in his life that have survived.⁵¹

⁵⁰ In 1973, a woman claimed to be the great-great-great-granddaughter of Nikolai Argunov, noting that his descendants had fought in the Revolution. This does not seem to be possible, however. Russian State Archive of Arts and Letters (RGALI) fond 1948, opis 1, ed. khr. 77, list 1. Varvara Rakina is responsible for finding documents that establish the circumstances of Argunov's death; see Rakina (2004), 134. For more on new archival evidence discovered by Rakina, see Rakina (2005), chapter two (29-38).

⁵¹ For more on Yakov Argunov's career, see Presnova (2005), 172-197.

Chapter 1: Family Portraits: The Argunovs' Paintings of the Sheremetevs' Circle

I. Introduction

In 1787, the comte de Ségur visited the Sheremetev family at Kuskovo as part of Catherine the Great's retinue. Providing one of few surviving accounts of foreigners visiting the estate, he described a decadent dinner party and an opera performance. "Ce qui me parut presque inconcevable," he wrote, "c'est que le poète et le musicien, auteurs de l'opéra, l'architecte qui avait construit la salle, le peintre qui l'avait décorée, les acteurs et actrices de la pièce, les figurans et figurantes des ballets, ainsi que les musiciens de l'orchestre, étaient tous des serfs du comte Schérémétoff."¹ Ségur was astonished at the accomplishments of these elite Sheremetev artists but thought that they should be freed, adding that in their case, "donner des lumières à ceux qu'on retient dans la servitude, c'est les éclairer sur leur malheur."² In his brief visit, Ségur had noticed that although the idea of Enlightenment seemed to be at odds with a state of servitude, serfs were somehow making art in an idiom supposedly alien to them.

Although Ségur did not take note of it, serfdom infiltrated the personal lives of the Sheremetev family as well as their cultural pursuits. Besides employing serf artists, the Sheremetevs took serf lovers, fathered and adopted serf children, and lived in every kind of intimacy with the type of serfs that Ségur would have termed enlightened – those who were educated and technically skilled. The Sheremetevs treated these relationships with

¹ Louis Philippe de Ségur, *Memoires; ou, souvenirs et anecdotes* (C. Hoffmann, 1829), 139. Catherine's visit is recounted in Douglas Smith's *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (Yale University Press, 2008), 75-84.

² Ségur, 139.

relative openness but complicated social problems still arose. These difficulties were recorded in art, particularly in portraits of serfs and favorites commissioned by the Sheremetevs. Furthermore, the artists making these portraits, Ivan and Nikolai Argunov, were themselves serfs. These portraits demonstrate how conspicuous serfdom was in the most elite of households, but also that the institution had become riven by internal inconsistencies by the late eighteenth century. They also demonstrate the expressive potential of portraiture in extreme social circumstances, conveying ideas about individuality, status, and ambition that relate to broader Enlightenment trends but are extremely rare in conditions of human bondage.

Although Ségur may have been alarmed by the confluence of servitude and Enlightenment, it was not just Western European ideas and idioms that informed serfs' understanding of themselves and their identity. Serf artists, particularly the Argunovs, reached toward uniquely Russian forms to portray themselves and other serfs. The Argunovs' portraiture demonstrates how the ideas and styles of the Enlightenment pervaded the Sheremetevs' palaces and yet were not fully able to describe — or represent — the hierarchies of the household or the intricate identities of its residents. The Sheremetevs filled their houses with commercial ephemera such as busts of Voltaire, beautifully bound works of the *philosophes*, and scientific instruments. Nevertheless, Nikolai Sheremetev's grandson maintained that despite his travels abroad and fashionable taste, he never succumbed to the destructive influence of the *Encyclopédie*.³ This claim is a reflection of the devout Sergei Sheremetev's wish to praise his ancestor's piety, but

³ Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (henceforth RGADA) fond 1286, opis 1, ed khr 4812, list 57.

there is truth in the notion that the Sheremetevs' engagement with the Enlightenment was, for the most part, consumerist.

The Argunovs' relationship with Enlightenment ideas was similarly complicated. Denied an Academic education, they avoided the institution's normative hierarchy as well as the rigors of anatomical and perspectival study. Learning from foreign and Russian portraitists, they took away the strategies that were most useful to them. Both were meticulous observers of the latest Western European art; Ivan collected prints, and Nikolai was given special permission to copy at the Hermitage.⁴ And yet their paintings of serfs incorporate Russian influences that are largely absent from their more conventional parade portraits. The line between "Western" and "Russian" modes of existence was not, of course, stable, and it has long been asserted that the former was largely theatrical, a performance of alien manners separate from naturally lived Russianness.⁵ Whether or not this is true (it will be a continual discussion throughout this dissertation), elite serfs were in a particularly delicate position. Many were proficient in multiple languages and trained with foreign masters. But serf painters, despite their mastery of the latest styles, were still in the thrall of owners who could order them fined or whipped for minor mistakes – as the painter Mikhail Zatsepin was for breaking a

⁴ Russian State Historical Archive (henceforth RGIA), fond 1088, opis 1, delo 307, list 4.

⁵ This is the fundamental idea of Yuri Lotman's writing on the eighteenth century and will be expanded upon in later chapters. See Yuri Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Russian Eighteenth-Century Culture," in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. I. U. M. Lotman, Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, and Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1984).

plate.⁶ Furthermore, despite a new interest in reconciling what the *Encyclopédie* termed "la distinction des états & du rang" and "l'esprit en quelque sorte, & le tempérament d'une personne" in a single portrait, there was not much European precedent for representing the seismic social transformations that would occur in the Sheremetev household during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁷ The Argunovs therefore looked for extremely local, personal antecedents in these cases, making stylistically unprecedented portraits that expressed some of the complexities and contradictions of their subjects' existence.

Ivan and Nikolai Argunov spent most of their time painting the Sheremetevs in portraits that were sometimes ostentatiously formal and sometimes conveyed some of the familiarity and intimacy that must have come from living – and being owned by – the same family for all or most of their lives. Parade portraits in the eighteenth century were paintings of power; aristocrats posed next to busts of monarchs or sat more casually with diamond brooches displaying an Empress' initials. In Yuri Lotman's formulation, "Even if the client ordered a portrait of him- or herself or family and the picture was intended to be hung in the family home, the sitter had to be shown wearing dress uniform with all medals and regalia; in other words, the viewer was presumed to be a 'stranger.'"⁸ While commissioning portraits of themselves, the Sheremetevs generally followed these conventions. In this chapter, however, I will examine the Argunovs' portraits of

⁶ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 239. Nikolai Argunov was initially fined for the incident. See Varvara Aleksandrovna Rakina, "Nikolai Argunov i problema zakazchika v russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi kontsa XVIII - pervoi chetverti XIX veka" (*Gosudarstvennii institut iskusstvoznaniya* 2005), 109.

⁷ Fortunato Bartolommeo Félice, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire universel raisonné des connoissances humaines: Plant - Pouz* (1774), 658.

⁸ Yuri Lotman (trans. Ann Shukman), *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (I.B. Tauris, 2001), 66.

Sheremetev householders who were outsiders: serfs and other lower ranking people who were taken in to the family but never fully legitimated. These paintings are also portrayals of power, more complex and attenuated than the parade portraits of their owners and patrons, but just as vital in mapping patterns of loyalty and identity.

The chapter will focus on two cases in particular. Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova, a Central Asian child adopted by the family, was treated affectionately but was never on the same footing as her Sheremetev siblings. More dramatically, the enserfed opera star Praskovia Ivanovna Kovaleva was freed by Nikolai Sheremetev and eventually married him, becoming a countess and the mother of the Sheremetev heir apparent. But the social scandal this occasioned and her premature death made her position in the family even more unstable. Ivan and Nikolai Argunov painted the nuances of these sitters' unconventional social standings in subtle and innovative ways, and this chapter will examine these paintings in depth and connect them to the Sheremetevs' larger project of self-portrayal through visual art.

In approaching the Argunovs' portraits from the perspective of the Sheremetevs' desire to control and construct their family's image, I am aware that I risk erasing the agency of these painters. But the extreme environment in which they worked, that is to say the state of being owned by their patrons, had an enormous influence on what and how they both painted and is key to understanding their work. The Argunovs painted projects conceived by the Sheremetevs and most of these were successful, ending up in public and private rooms in the family's palaces. Yet within these confines, it seems that both Ivan and Nikolai Argunov were sometimes able to experiment and respond creatively while still carrying out the commissions imposed upon them. The question of

how much control each artist had over formal decisions is unclear but from the few remaining documents that survive, it appears that the Sheremetevs cared mostly about subject matter. Correspondence between Nikolai Sheremetev and Nikolai Argunov about a portrait of Paul I, for example, mentions the jacket and medals to be included, but nothing about the formal elements of the painting.⁹ About the paintings discussed in this chapter, very little paperwork survives. But they, especially the Praskovia cycle, are so resourceful – and so different from the Argunovs' portraits of aristocratic sitters – that I believe their formal irregularities to be the innovations of enterprising painters rather than propaganda dictated from above. More even than their owners' wishes, the Argunovs' close observation of their comrades and their environment, their sly self-portraiture, and their informed melding of foreign and Russian allusions make these paintings utterly original. When asked (or commanded) to paint subjects rarely broached in conventional academic portraiture such as adoption, pregnancy, and death, both Argunovs responded by mining Russian and foreign painting for strategies with which they managed to paint in unprecedented ways.

The Sheremetevs were preoccupied with portraiture, which thrived commercially in Russia at the expense of history painting much as in Western Europe.¹⁰ Both Ivan and

⁹ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1535, list 1.

¹⁰ Since Russia had no culture of public salons or criticism during this period, history painting languished as a genre. An early piece of art criticism was published in 1814; see Konstantin Nikolaevich Batiushkov, "Progulka v Akademiiu khudozhestv," *Syn otchestva* 18, no. XLIX (1814). By 1802, the state of history painting was dire enough that Karamzin wrote an essay reminding artists of the goals of history painting and suggesting that Russian themes (rather than classical ones) might bring some freshness to the genre. Nikolai Karamzin, "On Events and Characters in Russian History That Are Possible Subjects of Art." Translated by Howard Segel in *The Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia*, edited by Howard Segel (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967), 459-469.

Nikolai Argunov painted portraits almost exclusively, with only a few copied history paintings known from either artist.¹¹ The Argunovs painted past and present monarchs, the Sheremetevs and their ancestors, and other members of the family circle. The finished portraits were displayed in close proximity, creating a visual lineage of power and influence and a construction of the Sheremetevs' past.¹² This was part of a larger attempt to commemorate family history, particularly by memorializing Feldmarshal Boris Petrovich Sheremetev (Pyotr's father and Nikolai's grandfather), whose stratospheric rise to prominence under Peter the Great ensured the family's fortune for generations. Ivan Argunov painted archaizing portraits of Boris and his wife (and Varvara Sheremeteva's parents) and the younger Sheremetevs commissioned faux Petrine projects, such as the Dutch House at Kuskovo, that lent a historical air to their new estates. The Argunovs' paintings of Sheremetev ancestors, empresses, and living family members were displayed in the same palaces and sometimes in the same rooms, many of which also had icons, the ultimate in powerful images.¹³

¹¹ One example is Ivan Argunov's small painting of Cleopatra and Nikolai Argunov's copy of Kauffman's Achilles. Ivan Argunov was told to paint an allegory of the four seasons, a project that was apparently never completed, but was told to copy the figures from a set of statues in the Kuskovo garden (see RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, dela 425 and 437).

¹² A Western European counterpart to this impulse is Maria Teresa's portrait room at Schönbrunn Palace, in which she "commemorated her deceased husband and celebrated the continuation of the Habsburg line through her children via portraits," in the process coopting the late emperor's study for her own project. Michael Yonan, *Empress Maria Theresa and the Politics of Habsburg Imperial Art* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 99.

¹³ According to Anna Mukovoz, the numerous portraits throughout Kuskovo constitute a "family tree." Anna Mukovoz, "*—khraniat familnye cherty*": portrety Sheremetevykh v usadbe Kuskovo (Moskva: Tritona, 2011), 2. Icons appear throughout inventories of

On a national scale, empresses were busy engaging in similar identity construction through portraiture. This phenomenon has been explored by Richard Wortman, who describes Peter's self-conscious adaptation of Western representational tropes as the beginning of a century-long artistic "performance of the imperial myth."¹⁴ Although Peter's reforms took hold early in the century, the need for politically insistent portraits continued due to the constant dynastic crises of the eighteenth century. In the absence of primogeniture or any stable line of succession, victorious contenders for the throne ended up emphasizing rupture with their weak predecessors and, simultaneously, similarity to Peter the Great. The result was a conception of royal lineage that had more to do with ideological affinity than blood ties. Through portraiture, empresses paid homage to Peter while ignoring their own marriages and successors, whether or not these were their children.

Aristocratic families, including the Sheremetevs, did not generally face such tumultuous scenarios of descent and legitimacy, since inheritance of titles was still governed by primogeniture. But the unusual succession situation made itself present in noble homes through the display of portraiture, as Russian families eagerly commissioned and put up paintings of monarchs past and present.¹⁵ These paintings,

Kuskovo and Ostankino, for example in the 1780s inventory of Kuskovo/RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 70, and the 1790 inventory of Ostankino (RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 194).

¹⁴ Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols., Studies of the Harriman Institute (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁵ Wortman contrasts the Russian nobility's enthusiastic and demonstrative loyalty to their tsars, expressed through displays of portraits and crests, to the "autonomous feudalism" of France. Wortman, 3.

sometimes in uncomfortable proximity, emphasized the nobility's ties to the tsars as well as the incongruous line of rulers. At Kuskovo, for instance, the Sheremetevs hung a portrait of Peter III near one of Catherine II; at Ostankino, an enormous Nikolai Argunov portrait of Paul remained in situ even after his murder.¹⁶ The family's loyalty to the throne may have been clear, but it was also clear that this loyalty was as malleable and contradictory as the succession line itself. Meanwhile, reforms to law and social life meant changes on a less dramatic scale to aristocratic family life. New inheritance rules meant that noblemen had some say in designating their inheritors and could sometimes empower women to manage their estates and family matters.¹⁷

In the midst of these changes, the Sheremetev family was a mutable group. Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetev had three legitimate children who survived into adulthood; his son and heir Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev had one. Pyotr's illegitimate children with his serf mistress Alyona Stepanova lived with the family and were given the shortened surname Remetev, as was customary at the time. Inventories of the Sheremetev households show that the Remetevs had a small retinue of personal servants, much more modest than their legitimate siblings but clearly a sign that they were waited upon instead

¹⁶ See RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 69 and delo 94.

¹⁷ The legal situation was complicated and changed throughout the course of the century. One example of a woman effectively inheriting her husband's affairs was Anna Petrovna Sheremeteva, the widow of Feldmarshal Boris Petrovich, who managed the family's property with notable competency. See Michelle Marrese, *A Woman's Kingdom: Noblewomen and the Control of Property in Russia, 1700-1861* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 183.

of serving the family as their mother had done.¹⁸ Other illegitimate children were not as lucky. Nikolai Petrovich also used the surname Remeteva for an illegitimate daughter.¹⁹ However, his son Ivan Yakimov remained in servitude and was a dancer in the family's serf ballet. Other children, of whom there may have been many given the habits of Sheremetev men, were not acknowledged at all. Meanwhile, unrelated serfs and outsiders were taken under the family's wing. Praskovia Kovaleva, whom Nikolai eventually married, spent her childhood living at Kuskovo with the young ballerina Tatiana Shlykova.²⁰ The Kalmyk child Anna Kalmykova, who came to live with the Sheremetevs in the 1760s, also had a suite of rooms in the Kuskovo palace.²¹ These wards lived relatively luxuriously, and the performers had the chance to devote themselves to their craft supervised by the best available singing and dancing teachers from Europe. At the same time, many more serfs lived and worked in domestic roles at Kuskovo, providing an astonishing level of service to their owners.²²

¹⁸ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1550, ll. 35-37. Yakov and Margarida Remetev each had four personal servants in 1802 – in contrast, Countess Praskovia Sheremeteva had nineteen “girls” assigned to her during the same year (ll. 12ob-13).

¹⁹ Douglas Smith has drawn up a useful family tree that includes illegitimate children. Smith, xv.

²⁰ For an account of Kovaleva's and Shlykova's upbringing at Kuskovo, see Smith, 37-41.

²¹ RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 69, list 13ob.

²² Priscilla Roosevelt contrasts a typical Russian household with the relatively austere habits of the British and French aristocracy. Russian country houses had live-in staffs of five hundred or more; sometimes serfs would be assigned a single garment to clean and care for, necessitating dozens of laundresses. Priscilla Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 103-104. The Sheremetevs, as art enthusiasts, kept multiples choruses, orchestras, and theatrical troupes in addition to traditional servants.

As Ségur noticed, the Sheremetevs were unabashed by the presence of serfs in their household. The topic of servitude could cause consternation in Western Europe (a literary example is the “dead silence” that follows Fanny Price’s inquiry about slavery in *Mansfield Park*).²³ However, the most vivid reactions to it in Russia come from foreign visitors, such as Ségur and Martha Wilmot, an Irish woman who was surprised (and seemingly amused) to see serf actors serving meals at some times and impersonating princes at others.²⁴ In the Sheremetevs' household, the most frank discussion of the social differences of the serf theater was laden with deception, as Nikolai Sheremetev wrote to his son to justify his decision to marry a low-ranking woman — while simultaneously claiming that she was of noble descent.²⁵ While many accounts of serf artists involve cruelty and humiliation derived from the social chasm between owner and serf, the Sheremetevs generally presented a conciliatory show of behavior and imagery intended to highlight the sophistication, talent, and refinement of their favorite serfs – and by extension, their own benevolence. The notoriously sadistic Yusupov family reportedly

²³ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (J.M. Dent & Company, 1906), 203.

²⁴ Both Smith and Roosevelt quote Martha Wilmot, who wrote of her observations of serf theater, "Our laborers, our cooks, our footmen and chamberlains turn into Princes, Princesses, Shepherds and Shepherdesses &c, &c. ... 'tis droll enough to be attended at Supper by the Herd of the piece who has been strutting before your Eyes in Gilded robes &c. &c. for half the evening." Wilmot, M., C. Wilmot, and H.M. Hyde. *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot* (Arno Press, 1934), 57. Mme de Staël did not discuss serf actors specifically but believed the lack of "a third estate" in Russia was "a great hindrance to the progress of literature and the fine arts ... But the result of this absence of an intermediary between the nobility and the populace is that they have greater affection for each other ... This is a a social organization entirely unfavorable to the enlightenment of the upper classes but not to the happiness of the lower." Germaine de Staël, *Politics, Literature, and National Character*, edited by Morroe Berger (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 366.

²⁵ RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 72.

had their dancers strip naked on stage and submit to public whippings, but the Sheremetevs included their leading ladies in dinner parties and balls.²⁶ Favorite serfs lived in luxurious rooms and had expensive wardrobes and jewelry collections.²⁷

Needless to say, comfortable standards of living only slightly narrowed the chasm between serf and owner and were extremely rare. Hundreds of thousands of rural Sheremetev serfs labored across many regions of Western Russia, seldom represented in art or visited by the family.²⁸ The Sheremetevs did consider these remote serfs, mostly while reviewing their accounts and ledgers and managing their vast administrative apparatus. A hand-drawn atlas from 1799-1800 attempts to make comprehensible the vastness of the Sheremetevs' capital, both in geographic and human terms (the project will be discussed in a subsequent chapter).²⁹ But most of the serf-related art commissioned by the Sheremetevs insisted on their favorites' comfort, refinement, and integration.

II. Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova (1767)

²⁶ For more on the Yusupovs, see Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 225-226.

²⁷ For example, Praskovia Sheremeteva's jewelry was catalogued in 1802 (RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1314, l. 56).

²⁸ Tracy Dennison examined the archive of the Sheremetevs' settlement at Voshchazhnikovo between the years 1750 and 1860, and did not find any record of a visit by the Sheremetevs. She observes that this does not mean that the family was disengaged, but rather that they ran their affairs through their centralized administrative offices. Tracy Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 40.

²⁹ The atlas is now located at RGIA (fond 1088, opis 3, delo 888).

An early portrait that treats these themes is Ivan Argunov's 1767 portrait of Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova, called Annushka (figure 1.1). The painting shows a child traversing cultures with apparent ease and it is one of the first Russian images of an ethnically Asian person in Western European clothing. Argunov's portrait shows off his familiarity with trends from half a world away. His thick, milky application of pigment would not look completely out of place next to paintings of children by Chardin or Greuze, despite the preternatural rigidity of the girl's pose. The painting is deeply self-referential, showing the fluidity with which Argunov employed the conventions of Catherinian Russia and of the particular family that owned him to paint something new and complex. The portrait defines Annushka using what Rosalind Blakesley has called a "constellation of complex relationships and identities," borrowing from parade portraits to contextualize an "orphan" far from her birthplace.³⁰ It also contextualizes Argunov himself, drawing upon his artistic and personal lineage as well as his sitter's.

The Sheremetevs had adopted Annushka and another Kalmyk girl called Ekaterina Borisovna sometime during the 1760s, although Ekaterina soon left the family to live with the Razumovsky family.³¹ While the circumstances of the children's arrival remain obscure, Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev maintained that they were a gift to Countess Varvara from her parents, the Cherkasskys.³² The circulation of Kalmyk

³⁰ Rosalind Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757-1881* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 171.

³¹ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4733, list 1. Ekaterina Borisovna was called Annushka's sister but their different patronymics suggest that they were not biologically related.

³² Ibid. See also Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev, "Dve Kalmychki," in *Otgosloski XVIII veka* (S. Peterburg: Tipographia M. M. Stasyulevicha, 1899).

children among elite Russian families was fashionable during this decade, a period that coincided with growing troubles for the Kalmyk people. Traditionally nomadic, they found their usual routes along the Volga constricted by the enclosure and agriculture that accompanied more than a hundred new Russian settlements in the region.³³ The fad for trafficking Kalmyk children coincided with a time when the question of integrating people of this ethnicity was a pressing political matter. Adopting foreign or foreign-seeming children, however, was not an entirely new concept. Sergei Dmitrievich, in his account of Annushka and Ekaterina, mentions that Kalmyk girls were to Elizabeth's era what Moldovan and Persian girls were to the previous generation.³⁴ According to contemporary accounts, the children were passed among families and were even given as gifts. Henrietta Carolina Hessen-Darmstadt, visiting St. Petersburg in 1773, wrote to her mother: "The Empress is thinking of obtaining two more Kalmyk children, a boy and a girl, and giving them to me, saying that if the little girl is satisfactory, that she might amuse you, my dear Mama."³⁵ She mentioned that the Kalmyks' faces were as charming as those on a Chinese fan or vase, conjecturing that the Kalmyks she had seen at court would have been born close to where such objects originated.³⁶

³³ Michael Khodarkovsky, *Where Two Worlds Met: The Russian State and the Kalmyk Nomads, 1600-1771* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 227.

³⁴ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4733, list 1.

³⁵ "Императрица думает еще пробрести двух детей калмыков, мальчика и девочку, и собирается отдать их мне, говоря, что если девочка будет достаточно, то пусть она развлекает вас, моя дорогая мама." Andrei Nikolaevich Spaschanskii, ed. *Yekaterinskii Peterburg glazami inostrantsev: neizdannye pisma 1770-kh godov* (Sankt Peterburg: Paritet, 2013), 169.

³⁶ Ibid.

Surviving documents about Kalmykova's relationship with the Sheremetevs demonstrate their effusive – and seemingly genuine – affection for her, along with a certain self-consciousness about her difference from them. A letter from Varvara Sheremeteva expresses tenderness in an unusual way and reveals that Annushka was living in Moscow while the rest of the family were in St. Petersburg:

Душа моя, аннushка, здравствуй со всей своей свитой. Приежай, душа моя, к намь скорый. Боже благослови путь вашь и дай Боже въ радости тебя видить. Дединька, маманька, тятя, тетя, и я тебя целуемъ и глазушки твои таракашки. Баба твоя, Варвара Шереметева³⁷

Annushka, my soul, greetings to you from everyone. My soul, travel to us soon. God bless your path and may God see you happy. Your grandpa, mama, uncle, aunt, and I kiss you and your little beetle eyes. Your granny, Varvara Sheremeteva

The phrase “little beetle eyes” suggests that Annushka's facial features, different from those of ethnic Slavs, continued to be noticed by her new family. Other letters from Varvara Sheremeteva also express the desire to kiss her “little nose and dear little eyes.”³⁸ Tellingly, these letters were addressed “Анне Николаевне. / Калмычке Графини Варвары Алексеевны Шереметевой” (To Anna Nikolaevna / Countess Varvara Alekseevna Sheremeteva's Kalmyk), indicating the child's status as an outsider who belonged to the countess.³⁹ Annushka's letters from this period are lost, but as an adult, she continued corresponding with Pyotr Sheremetev. In a letter from 1782, addressed to “Д. Д. М.” (дорогой дедушка мой/my dear grandfather), she addressed him in the

³⁷ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4733, list 2.

³⁸ Ibid., list 3.

³⁹ Ibid., list 1.

formal “vy” (vous) form but wrote warmly of how she missed him, urging him to sit close to the fire lest he catch a chill “as in peasant cottages.”⁴⁰ Annushka appears to have felt lifelong affection for the family that took her in, even though the adoption did not place her on equal footing with the Sheremetevs’ biological, legitimate children. She lived quite comfortably, however, and her social status as the family’s ward enabled her to marry a minor Russian nobleman. She would name her own children Pyotr and Varvara after the Count and Countess.⁴¹

Ivan Argunov painted Kalmykova’s portrait in 1767, soon after Varvara Sheremeteva’s death. The exact circumstances of the commission are unclear but it serves as a simultaneous memorial to the Countess and a visual clarification of Annushka’s place in the family, even after the death of her adoptive grandmother. At the same time, the portrait invokes Empress Elizabeth, who had died five years before, contextualizing Annushka in a hierarchy of patronage and protection. Argunov depicts a modern, fashionable child very differently from the usual portrayals of Kalmyks from this era. The result highlights a tendency toward expansion both for the modern Russian empire and for the Sheremetevs as a family.

Annushka Kalmykova’s European dress in particular demonstrates how subtly the Sheremetevs envisioned her difference from them. Henrietta Carolina Hessen-Darmstadt immediately mentioned Chinese fans when she described the Kalmyk children she saw in St. Petersburg – and indeed, clothing was usually the marker that distinguished Kalmyks

⁴⁰ RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 32, list 6.

⁴¹ Natalia Presnova, *Argunovy, krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*, ed. N. G. Presnova (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2005), 49.

most visibly from Russians. Images of Kalmyks usually played up ethnographic or pseudo-ethnographic details, sometimes eschewing physiognomic differences altogether. For example, Anna Rosina Lisiewska's portrait 1756 of the future Catherine II and Peter III (Swedish National Museum NMGrh 1269) includes a person who is possibly a Kalmyk page, ethnically indistinguishable from the Russian and German adults beside him but clad in ambiguously Oriental garb and a jeweled turban (figure 1.2).⁴² Similarly, Kalmyks in the Imperial Porcelain Manufactory's series of Russian peoples have generically Slavic features and pale skin, but wear elaborate fur costumes and exotic hairstyles.⁴³ The figurines showed off the diversity and vastness of the expanding Russian Empire while insisting on racial homogeneity. Tatiana Selinova catalogs several other images of Kalmyks from the period, notably a Kalmyk boy holding a painting in Rokotov's "Cabinet of I. I. Shuvalov," but other portraits of Kalmyk people in Western clothing begin to appear only early in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Annushka's features are individual and candidly painted, and her skin tone is darker and warmer than her Sheremetev sisters'. Furthermore, her pose strongly echoes Argunov's paintings of the Sheremetevs' biological daughters, which were displayed in

⁴² I am grateful to Eva Lena Karlsson of the National Museum in Stockholm for explaining why the child is identified as a Kalmyk, largely on the basis of Catherine's memoir, which mentions a Kalmyk boy who took care of the spaniel. The child was previously thought to be Paul, but he was probably too young at this point. Catherine, M. Cruse, and H. Hoogenboom (eds.), *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great* (Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 70.

⁴³ For example, Metropolitan Museum 1982.60.149 and 1982.60.151.

⁴⁴ Selinova, 57-58. The Rokotov painting is now lost but a copy of it (by the serf artist Zyablov) survives. See N. G. Presnova, *Fyodor Rokotov: 1735/1736-1808* (Moskva: Gos. Tretyakovskaia gallereia 2016), 10-11.

the same room as Annushka's portrait (figure 1.3 and 1.4).⁴⁵ The Sheremetev girls also sit in three-quarters view in front of indistinct backgrounds, looking slightly downward at the viewer and holding small accessories. Young Varvara holds a fan in her lap, while Anna unwinds embroidery thread. Kalmykova's portrait has virtually the same composition as Anna Sheremeteva's, though it is a little smaller in size. The two girls strike the same erect pose and wear morphologically similar outfits, despite Kalmykova's more modest textiles and jewelry. Both are also brandishing emblems of patronage: Anna Sheremeteva wears a diamond brooch with Catherine's monogram, and Anna Kalmykova holds a print. Argunov conspicuously rhymed his painting of Annushka Kalmykova with his portrait of Anna Sheremeteva. Both the similarities and the differences would have been very noticeable in the same room, drawing attention to Annushka's inclusion in the group as well as the factors that distinguished her from the young countesses.

The engraving that Kalmykova holds is copied not from a print but from a 1746 painting of Varvara Sheremeteva by Georg Grooth (figure 1.5). For the Sheremetevs, prints were a convenient way to commission portraits in situations where the subject was unavailable to sit; for example, in 1786, Pyotr Borisovich ordered Argunov to paint a portrait of his deceased friend Aleksandr Lanskoj using the most recent engraving of his

⁴⁵ At least by the first detailed inventory of Kuskovo in 1792; cf. Presnova, 46-47. The portrait of Varvara Sheremeteva was painted in 1766; Anna Sheremeteva's portrait is estimated in the Presnova catalog to be from the second half of the 1760s (Sheremeteva died in 1768). The lack of a firm date calls the order of Argunov's self-references into question, since it is possible that he painted Annushka before Anna. However, even if this were the case, the differences between the way each young woman was portrayed are still significant. Selinova does not discuss this portrait because it was initially thought to be the work of a follower of Antropov. However, technical analysis in the 1980s suggested that it was the work of Argunov; Presnova calls it and the Varvara Petrovna portrait a "compositional pair." Presnova, 47.

likeness.⁴⁶ The print in Annushka's portrait is curious because it is based only on a painting, and an outdated one at that. The child could have posed near Argunov's newer portrait of the countess or her marble bust for a more conventional composition. As it is, the print serves as a reminder of Annushka's status; like her clothes, it is humbler than her adoptive siblings' attributes in their nearby portraits. A print was an attainable purchase for Sheremetev householders, most of whom received a yearly stipend as well as lodging and food, and Argunov himself owned a collection of prints as we know from his sons' dispute in 1815. The engraving also presents itself as something transitory and ephemeral compared to the traditional relationships symbolized by marble and bronze. Its mobility might evoke Annushka's own dislocation from her nomadic family, her sudden arrival in the Sheremetevs' house, and her "sister" Ekaterina Borisovna's sudden departure.

Nevertheless, Annushka's print positions her in an inverse hierarchy of patronage that connects her, albeit indirectly, with the Russian monarchy. Annushka holds her print (figure 1.6) facing outward so the viewer can see Varvara Alekseevna Sheremeteva, her adoptive mother or grandmother (Sheremeteva referred to herself as Annushka's *babushka*, a title that could be informed as much by her age as her understanding of the relationship), in a three-quarters view that rhymes with what we see of Annushka herself. In the print, Sheremeteva wears a miniscule brooch with a cameo; in Grooth's original, the jewel is revealed to be a portrait of Elizabeth, for whom Sheremeteva served as lady in waiting. This relationship is clarified by Argunov's French caption: "La Comtesse Barbara Cheremetoff, Dame d'honneur de Sa M. I. [Sa Majesté Impériale des toutes les]

⁴⁶ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4812, list 150.

Russies." Annushka Kalmykova is thus linked to Imperial protection, though at one step further of remove than Anna Sheremeteva, and thanks to the intercession of her adoptive grandmother.

Argunov has painted a fictive print copied from Grooth's 1746 original, mapping out his own origins. Signing the painting on the imaginary paper, he writes "Argunow pinxit / Anno 1767 Nov. 27." The Latin signature – not to mention the facture of the painting – indicates the extent to which Argunov considered himself a painter in the European tradition. Argunov, when he signed his paintings, always wrote in Latin letters and usually spelled his name in the French way, "I. Argunoff," occasionally adding "pinxit" or the date.⁴⁷ Documents signed by Argunov during his alternate career as an administrator are always in Russian, his stylized and careful Cyrillic signature conspicuous next to the messy writing of his peers.⁴⁸ But it is too reductive to parse his life so cleanly into Russian and Western halves, the one for ceremony and virtuosity, the other for the mundane and sometimes oppressive tasks of the Moscow household.⁴⁹ The Annushka portrait demonstrates how central Argunov's understanding of the Sheremetev family was to his painting, how he composed multiple portraits that spoke to each other compositionally within a domestic setting, and how the intricacies of their serf ownership affected not only his depiction of the child, but of himself.

⁴⁷ Tatiana Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973), 195-202.

⁴⁸ E.g. RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1535, list 6.

⁴⁹ Ivan Argunov's signature appears on a wide variety of household documents, including a file concerning the punishment of a musician for drunkenness and attempted escape (RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1534, l. 1).

The portrait represents the origins not just of Annushka but of Varvara Sheremeteva, formerly Cherkasskaya. Argunov had belonged to the Cherkassky family and was part of Varvara's dowry when she married Pyotr Sheremetev in 1743. Argunov's portrait is a sort of valediction, since she had recently died, and perhaps a statement of allegiance similar to what Annushka demonstrates in the painting. Furthermore, Varvara's portrait within the painting also pays tribute to Georg Grooth, Argunov's teacher, who completed the original around the time Argunov began studying with him.⁵⁰ The "pinxit" that Argunov inscribes directly on the fictive print might be a playful claim of partial authorship, since he might have helped with Grooth's portrait as a young man, or an assumption of his late instructor's mantle as a Sheremetev family portraitist.

In a painting (figure 0.6) thought to be a self-portrait, Argunov depicts a man holding several tools. The subject of this painting, once believed to be an unknown sculptor, holds drawing implements that Tatiana Selinova links with practices of copying from the mid-eighteenth century.⁵¹ If it is indeed a self-portrait, this painting gives a new dimension to the fictive print in the Annushka portrait. Argunov's work was limited, pushed in directions the Sheremetevs dictated. Much of his output involved copying, including from many works that would have seemed archaic and out of date, like Schurmann's portrait of Boris Sheremetev (figure 0.1). Yet Argunov managed to manipulate these constraints to his advantage, working within a relatively limited visual environment to make allusive images. The painting shows Argunov's understanding of

⁵⁰ Selinova, 14-15.

⁵¹ Ibid., 47-50. Sharandak also identifies the painting as a self-portrait, see Natalia Pavlovna Sharandak, *Ivan Argunov: 1727-1802* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1977), 14.

the child's identity and his own, demonstrating his strengths as a painter in the European style and his eye for the various social impossibilities the Sheremetevs asked him to depict.

The question of Argunov's competing Russian and Western influences is complicated by the existence of a later portrait by Nicolas Benjamin Delapierre, a French artist active in Russia (figure 1.7). Delapierre's painting shows a Kalmyk child in the same pose as Annushka, holding the same print version of Grooth's 1746 portrait. The identity of the sitter is unclear; while apparently Kalmyk, she looks dramatically different from Annushka Kalmykova even taking into account any maturation in the years between. The painting has sometimes been referred to as a portrait of Ekaterina Borisovna, the other Kalmyk child taken in by the Sheremetevs, but this is unlikely because Ekaterina left shortly to live with the Razumovsky family. While Annushka seems to have written letters to her, this contact was sporadic and seemingly not of great interest to the Sheremetevs.⁵² So the portrait seems to be Annushka, an identification strengthened by Selinova's observation that a portrait of Annushka in a "round, oval frame" is mentioned in Kuskovo inventories.⁵³ On one hand, this seems like a dismissal of Argunov's work, if this is indeed Annushka and the painting was intended to replace or update the earlier version. If this were the case, the prestige of a French portraitist would prove to be valued more than the work of a serf artist. But on the other hand, it can also be interpreted as a rare compliment to Argunov's originality. Although he was

⁵² As an adult, Anna Kalmykova did end many of her letters to Pyotr Sheremetev by saying that Ekaterina Borisovna sent her best regards (see RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 32).

⁵³ Selinova, 58.

barred from history painting, it appears that his composition clearly conveyed what the Sheremetevs wished it to. Delapierre merely copied Argunov's prior painting, changing little except the girl's clothing (and, oddly, the physiognomy of her face). Argunov's original must have been deemed perceptive enough to instruct the foreign artist how to depict a family member in unusual circumstances. Argunov had worked out how to portray the child using visual cues from his own prior work and from other family portraits; Delapierre merely updated the surfaces.

III. Praskovia Ivanovna Sheremeteva (Kovaleva), 1803-1804

The next momentous familial change for the Sheremetevs did not take place until the first years of the nineteenth century. The possible disruption of taking in Anna Kalmykova as a ward was minor compared to the 1801 wedding of Nikolai Petrovich, officially head of the family since Pyotr Borisovich's death in 1788, to Praskovia Ivanovna Kovaleva, the prima donna of the family's serf opera troupe. Although the marriage was initially kept secret, the birth of a son in 1803 and Praskovia Sheremeteva's death soon afterward necessitated the disclosure of the relationship and a campaign to legitimate the match if their child was to be recognized.⁵⁴ Besides obtaining Tsar Alexander I's apparently reluctant blessing, Nikolai Sheremetev had to convince his family that Praskovia was his legitimate spouse and that his son Dmitri was his legitimate heir, a particularly urgent matter since Nikolai was chronically ill. Campaigning for Sheremeteva's legitimacy meant claiming her as a noblewoman, a strange notion after she had spent decades performing as a serf. Nikolai was ultimately successful in his bid to have her recognized as a long-lost Polish noble and his legal spouse but he was left

⁵⁴ Smith, 235-237.

with a paradox: his deceased wife was both noble and enserfed. To contend with this question and to memorialize her, he commissioned a series of three portraits from Nikolai Argunov (figures 0.3, 0.4, and 0.5). The cycle, a departure from Argunov's usual style and techniques, consists of some of the strangest Russian portraits from this period, and contends not only with the dynastic crisis that the Sheremetevs faced but problems arising from their ownership and intimacy with serfs.

The portrait cycle is unusual both in style and iconography, frankly depicting pregnancy and death using techniques that defy conventional strategies of representation. Faced with Praskovia's contradictory social identity, Argunov turned to older precedents to guide him. Ivan Argunov, while painting Annushka, drew on print-making and fashionable parade portraits to create a picture of modernity and integration; his son Nikolai, painting a much more disruptive family episode, looked deeper into the past. Ségur's worry that education might illuminate a serf's true position proved to be not entirely correct; Western-style training gave Nikolai Argunov the ability to paint smiling actors and aristocrats but proved insufficient to the task of depicting Praskovia's unstable role as simultaneous serf, Countess, and descendant of Polish aristocrats. Integrating the influence of Petrine imagery and the Sheremetevs' self-contained and self-referential visual culture, Argunov painted subject matter that had been all but excluded from eighteenth-century art.

The definitive account of Praskovia Sheremeteva appears in Douglas Smith's meticulously researched *The Pearl*. His archival research clarifies (as much as possible) a deliberately obscure history. Kovaleva began her association with the Sheremetevs as a young child, her apparently extraordinary voice distinguishing her from other young serfs

who were scouted in the Sheremetevs' remote villages and brought to Moscow and St. Petersburg for training. The origins of her affair with Nikolai are unknown but coincided with her rise to the top of the opera troupe. As time passed, her status as a family favorite allowed her to live in increasing comfort and privacy; eventually, her quarters at Ostankino were nearly as grand as Nikolai's own, although inventories reveal slightly plainer furnishings.⁵⁵ Declining health forced her to retire in the late 1790s, concluding a career whose highlight had been the personal praise of Catherine the Great, who also gave her a diamond ring after hearing her sing in 1787 (during the visit attended by Ségur).⁵⁶ Nikolai and Praskovia Sheremetev married secretly in 1801 in a ceremony sanctioned by the church, and the next year she became pregnant. In February of 1803, she died a few days after giving birth to Dmitri Nikolaevich Sheremetev, probably from complications of tuberculosis exacerbated by labor.

After his wife's death, Nikolai Sheremetev initially planned to commemorate her by ordering a copy of a pastel of her in theatrical armor from an Italian artist in Moscow (figure 1.8).⁵⁷ The portrait, which showed her as Eliane in Grétry's *Mariages Samnites*, had hung in her own bedroom at Ostankino.⁵⁸ The idea to copy this portrait in oils seems like an attempt to recapture her prime as an enserved actress, specifically in a role that

⁵⁵ RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 194, listy 21-21ob.

⁵⁶ Smith, 84.

⁵⁷ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 216, listy 56-56 ob. The Bardou attribution is not certain. Archival evidence related to the commission is discussed in Rakina (2004), 84.

⁵⁸ MMUO Ostankino Opis 1802, l. 222ob.

emphasized the theme of natural freedom. Rushing off into battle, Eliane laments the passive role of women in Samnite society, singing:

“Si je suis née avec un courage au-dessus de mon sexe; si ma main ne craint pas de porter les armes... quel homme a le droit de me prévenir par son choix, plutôt que d’attendre le mien? Votre loi est injuste autant que cruelle... Si dès notre enfance on ne nous avait point accoutumées à n’oser penser & sentir d’après nous mêmes, nous réclamerions nos droits, ou plutôt ceux de la Nature, & si nos Maîtres osaient prétendre à nous forcer d’obéir, le mépris feroit notre réponse, & le courage notre vengeur.”⁵⁹

As Inna Naroditskaya has observed, private serf theater troupes often provided a literal stage upon which class tensions were gingerly explored through the tropes of classical drama.⁶⁰ By ordering a copy of the portrait showing Praskovia as Eliane, Sheremetev was replicating an image of her performing a future version of herself, claiming a higher social status and recognition for her natural talents. And theatrical activities were not considered improper for non-serfs or even for Praskovia in her new role as a Countess (although illness prevented her from singing). Nikolai’s sister Anna Sheremeteva, who had acted on the family stage before her death at twenty-four was depicted in similar armor in an anonymous portrait from the 1760s, indicating that showy costumes did not indicate a lower rank or unbridgeable social divide.⁶¹ But Sheremetev was dissatisfied

⁵⁹ B.F. Du Rozoi and A.E.M. Grétry, *Les mariages samnites: drame lyrique en trois actes et en prose* (Constapel, 1777), 23-24. The Sheremetevs produced a version that was translated into Russian, which is perhaps why Ségur thought the play had been written by a serf.

⁶⁰ Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera: The Tsarina From State to Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53-80.

⁶¹ Although Anna Sheremeteva did participate in theatrical performances, this costume was for Catherine's Carrousel of 1766 (a concept borrowed from Louis XIV). See Anthony Cross and Newberry Thomas, "Professor Thomas Newberry's Letter from St Petersburg, 1766, on the Grand Caroussel and Other Matters," *The Slavonic and East*

with the oil copy and at some point in 1803 charged Argunov with painting portraits of his late wife.⁶² The new cycle would delve into problems of rank and identity even more than the portrait of freedom-loving Eliane.

The circumstances of the commission are unclear; the most straightforward surviving document records a payment of one thousand rubles to Argunov for “portraits.”⁶³ Argunov had received only 164 rubles in salary the year before and the thousand would have been a very large amount to pay a serf painter.⁶⁴ In contrast, the Sheremetevs’ French cook received a salary of 400 rubles a year in 1802, and around that time, they tried to hire a British gardener and landscape designer (the delightfully named Roman Manners) for 5000 rubles.⁶⁵ A male serf without land and only menial skills cost about 100 rubles in the late eighteenth century.⁶⁶ But then again, within the past few years, the Sheremetevs had spent 750 rubles on pineapple plants, 2000 rubles on

European Review 76, no. 3 (1998). I am grateful to Erin McBurney for explaining the purpose of the costume to me.

⁶² The oil copy of Praskovia’s pastel is now at Ostankino and technically poor, with dry colors and indifferent attention to her features.

⁶³ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 220, cited in Varvara Rakina, *Zhivopisets Nikolai Argunov* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2004), 91. Rakina points out that Argunov also painted portraits of Dmitri Sheremetev around this period, which are now lost.

⁶⁴ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1550, ll. 19ob-20.

⁶⁵ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed. khr. 4820, ll. 112 and 114. For a full account of the Sheremetevs’ expenditures from this period, see Vladimir Staniukovich, *Biudzhet Sheremetevykh: 1798-1910* (Moskva: Upr. museiami-usadbami i muzeiami-monastyriami Glavnauki NKP, 1927) and K. N. Shchepetov, *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885*, Trudy Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia (Moskva: Izd. Dvortsa-muzeia, 1947).

⁶⁶ Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia, From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 426.

Mecklenburg horses, and 400 rubles on a print of the crucifixion.⁶⁷ And all of these expenses pale next to the Sheremetevs' wealth. Besides their human capital of serfs, who numbered at least 200,000 at this point, and their six major palaces, even their personal possessions were worth a staggering amount. Praskovia Sheremeteva's jewelry collection included 275 pieces, mostly diamonds but also some strands of pearls worth 8000 rubles each, and in one house alone Nikolai had 150 snuffboxes worth up to 14,000 rubles apiece.⁶⁸ So while it was not a particularly lavish expenditure on Nikolai Sheremetev's part, it did represent unusual satisfaction with Nikolai Argunov's work.

The document does not specify the number of portraits that Sheremetev was paying for, and this, combined with the general obscurity of the project and the strangeness of the paintings, has created doubts about Argunov's authorship. Of the three portraits in the cycle, only the parade portrait of Sheremeteva in a white dress and shawl resembles his usual output. The two other paintings are dramatic departures. One shows Sheremeteva heavily pregnant, standing in a similar pose to the previous parade portrait but painted with harsh colors and awkward spatial articulation. The other depicts her dead in her coffin, covered by shrouds and situated in empty black space. I follow Varvara Rakina's lead in attributing them all to Nikolai Argunov; as she notes, Yakov Argunov, who has been posited as an alternative author of the coffin painting, was still very young in 1803 and unlikely to be contributing to such an important portrait cycle.⁶⁹ Rakina also points out that there was another large-format painting in the cycle, a full-length portrait

⁶⁷ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed. khr. 4820, ll. 63, 106, 109.

⁶⁸ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1314, ll. 12ob-17 and 63.

⁶⁹ Rakina (2004), 88.

showing Sheremeteva dead that was inventoried in the Fountain House.⁷⁰ It is unclear what happened to this part of the series and what relationship it had with the extant, small-scale coffin painting.

The portrait of Praskovia Sheremeteva in the red shawl, certainly the most conventional of the three paintings and probably the latest, shows her in a fashionable white gown and lace cap, holding a fan and a drawstring purse (figure 0.3). A miniature of her husband hangs from her necklace, part of the visual convention of including patrons or social superiors in the form of pictures within pictures, as seen in Ivan Argunov's Annushka Kalmykova portrait and many others by the Argunovs and other Russian artists. Compared to the corporeal explicitness of the next two portraits in the cycle, this painting shows Sheremeteva clothed in a garment that hides her figure, unmoored from the context of the room, and avoiding direct eye contact. The white dress, bemoaned in Western Europe for showing too much of the female anatomy, almost completely covers Sheremeteva, aided by the tent-like swathe of her red shawl.⁷¹ This heavy draping, along with her unfocused gaze, places emphasis on the materials that cover her, marking her as a generically elite noblewoman. All of Sheremeteva's past is erased and there is no sign of her former life as a serf or her theatrical career. Her diamond ring may be the same one presented to her by Catherine when she visited with Ségur, or perhaps not. Even the miniature of Nikolai is smudged and indistinct.

⁷⁰ Rakina (2005), 102. Rakina credits Douglas Smith with finding the document.

⁷¹ See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Nudity a la grecque in 1799," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998). Ewa Lajer-Burcharth also discusses the phenomenon in *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 236-306.

Compared to Ivan Argunov's portrait of Annushka Kalmykova, which so precisely situated her with her family and within society at large, this painting reveals very little about its subject other than her rank, wealth, and relation to the blurry man in the miniature.

The setting of the portrait is unspecific, but that is not in itself unusual for Argunov or more generally in Russia. Marcia Pointon distinguishes between the carefully rendered interiors for the most elite patrons of British portrait painters versus the generic outdoor settings for their less wealthy sitters, observing that the latter would require less attention and time.⁷² In contrast, the Sheremetevs had complete control over their serf painters' attention and time, but the Argunovs painted blurry backgrounds or generic rooms, including drapery and the odd chair but eschewing recognizable details and architectural specificity.⁷³ Sitters for both father and son also posed in a similar way; the seated, three-quarter view recurs again and again. Sometimes this was used for striking effect, as seen with the Annushka portrait that was displayed in the same room as paintings of the Sheremetev children that were similar in composition and size. But most of the time, the compositional choices deployed again and again created a kind of formula, sometimes inclusive, and sometimes highlighting difference when novelties were introduced.

⁷² Marcia Pointon, "Portrait-Painting As a Business Enterprise in London in the 1780s," *Art History* 7, no. 2 (1984), 203.

⁷³ Borovikovsky's posthumous portrait of Nikolai Sheremetev includes his orphanage in the background and Kiprensky's painting of Dmitri Sheremetev shows the interior of Fontannyi Dom (where Kiprensky lived), but these were both completed well into the nineteenth century. As far as I am aware, no eighteenth-century images of recognizable Sheremetev interiors exist.

Argunov's general uniformity makes the other two portraits – those of the coffin and of the pregnancy – so much more unusual. The pregnancy painting superficially follows parade portrait conventions (unidentifiable room with drapery, static pose in the middle) but its awkward perspective and coloration, not to mention its almost unprecedented subject matter, mark it as one of the strangest paintings of its era. While the portrait of Sheremeteva in a white dress is packed with expensive accessories and furnishings, the pregnancy portrait is oddly austere. Sheremeteva's large belly dominates the composition, but Nikolai Sheremetev is also uncannily present in the form of a bizarre portrait bust. At slightly more than 2.5 meters high, this painting is one of the largest portraits in the Sheremetevs' collection, making its unusual formal qualities and subject matter not just conspicuous but confrontational.

While portraits of pregnant women were extremely rare, there is one precedent from 1776, Alexander Roslin's portrait of Grand Duchess Natalia Alekseevna (figure 1.9). While not as overt as Argunov's portrait, the painting shows Grand Duke (and future tsar) Paul's first wife seated and wearing a loose jacket. Natalia Alekseevna and her baby died shortly after she gave birth in April, 1776. Completed in the same year, the painting shows her in an advanced stage of pregnancy that appeared obvious to viewers; Jacob von Staehlin, in a brief description of the portrait, wrote that the Duchess was "pregnant, with her hand on her belly."⁷⁴ Dating from thirty years prior to Praskovia's death, and formally very different, the portrait is nevertheless a tempting precedent because of the implications of Natalia Alekseevna's pregnancy. Due to give birth to an

⁷⁴ Yacob von Staehlin (ed. Konstantin Malinovsky), *Zapiski Yacobi Shtelina ob izyashnikh iskusstvakh v Rossii* (Iskusstvo, 1990), 92.

heir (the son of frustrated Paul, whose mother's regency showed no signs of ending), Natalia Alekseevna had apparently been conducting an affair with Count Razumovsky. After her death, Catherine persuaded Paul that the child was not his own and convinced him to remarry quickly.⁷⁵ So at the time the portrait was painted, the legitimacy of the child was in question, Catherine's other children were definitely illegitimate and quasi secret, and even Paul's own paternity was the subject of gossip.

Faced with a similar crisis, Nikolai Sheremetev might have encouraged Argunov to follow the precedent of earlier decades' propaganda. It is possible that Argunov could have seen the Roslin portrait during his trips to the Hermitage, which Sheremetev arranged on his behalf.⁷⁶ Also, the Sheremetevs' portrait gallery at Kuskovo (where Nikolai Argunov had spent his formative years) featured a variation of this portrait.⁷⁷ Painted after Roslin's original, this version shows Natalia Alekseevna in a loose dress but less obviously pregnant than the other portrait. What seems likely, however, is that both Sheremetev and Argunov understood the succession crises that had recurred throughout the eighteenth century and had only recently ended with Paul's reestablishment of primogeniture in 1796. The impulse to commission a portrait of the pregnant Natalia Alekseevna – to smooth over fears of illegitimacy and infertility, while suggesting a notion of heredity that Catherine herself openly flouted – can only be understood in the

⁷⁵ Lindsey Hughes, *The Romanovs: Ruling Russia, 1613-1917* (Hambledon Continuum, 2008), 144. His second wife, Maria Fyodorovna, among other accomplishments, would give birth to ten children, ending the succession crisis.

⁷⁶ RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 307, l. 4. In a letter from 1796, Sheremetevs asks Count Yusupov permission for “my painter” to “copy pictures.”

⁷⁷ Presnova (2002), 313.

context of Russia's unpredictable succession of monarchs and the propaganda they employed to justify their own or their favorites' claim to the throne. The turbulent hand-offs of the eighteenth century in turn informed Sheremetev's understanding of his own circumstances and likely Argunov's approach to depicting them.

Russia's succession difficulties began with Peter the Great, whose conflict with his son Alexei Petrovich led to the latter's imprisonment and death. In 1722, Peter issued an ukaz decreeing: "it should always be the will of the Ruling Sovereign to designate whomever he chooses as heir, and moreover, perceiving some inadequacy, to set the designated one aside."⁷⁸ Peter died unexpectedly in 1725 without naming another heir, beginning a long series of battles for the throne in which perceived competency and commitment to Petrine values came to be more highly prized than genetic connection to the Romanovs. Peter's widow, Catherine I, became the first beneficiary of the new succession laws but lived only a few years. Until 1796, a succession of Empresses was only briefly interrupted by weak male heirs. Anna (Peter's niece), Elizabeth (Peter's daughter), and Catherine II (the widow of Peter's grandson) dominated the century, while Peter II, Ivan VI, and Peter III barely made it to the throne room before dying, being deposed, or both. Paul, Catherine's son for whom she ostensibly served as regent while shunting him to the side, became tsar in 1796 after her death and managed to reestablish primogeniture before being killed himself several years later. While his new rules did not completely quash succession problems, they did lead to a much more predictable (and all-male) line of tsars until 1917.

⁷⁸ Ukaz translated in James Cracraft, *Major Problems in the History of Imperial Russia* (D.C. Heath, 1994), 115.

One result of Russia's dynastic unrest was the emphasis, through both textual and visual sources, of what Wortman has termed *renovatio* – a rupture from ineffectual regimes.⁷⁹ Eighteenth-century empresses were also eager to express philosophical alignment with Peter's reforms even as they supplanted (or murdered) his direct descendants. Hence the prevalence of propaganda such as "Catherine II voyageant dans ses états en 1787" (figure 1.10), an engraving that shows Catherine spreading Enlightenment values to the newly annexed Crimea (one of her traveling companions on this journey, incidentally, was Ségur). Catherine is completely removed from the son who nominally gave her the power to rule, but Peter the Great is present in the upper right corner of the print — looking on approvingly from heaven next to Zeus.⁸⁰ In this context, paternity and maternity alike played a minimal role. Catherine did not include Paul in portraits of herself, even as queens such as Marie Antoinette in France and Charlotte in England emphasized virtuous motherhood. In fact, when Vigée Lebrun visited Russia, Catherine was horrified by the sentimental idiom with which she depicted royal children, reportedly saying of her portraits of Paul's daughters: "ce sont deux singes accroupis...Elles ont l'air de deux *filles*, et puis c'est tout."⁸¹ Catherine's predecessors Elizabeth and Anna had no issue and ignored the theme of motherhood in their portraits.

⁷⁹ Wortman, 82.

⁸⁰ Erin McBurney notes that the print, after a painting by the Flemish officer Ferdinand de Meys, was designed for mass consumption, and was sold by subscription. Catherine's improbable youth and radiance position her as "the embodiment of a new Russia" (although one that is apparently approved of by the late Peter). Erin McBurney, "Picturing the Greek Project: Catherine II's Iconography of Conquest and Culture," *Russian Literature* 75, no. 1-4 (2014), 434.

⁸¹ C. de Larivière and A. Rambaud, *Catherine II et la révolution française* (Le Soudier, 1895), 132.

While forgoing or ignoring children, the three empresses were comfortable emphasizing their femininity in official images. Although Elizabeth and Catherine both commissioned portraits of themselves wearing men's dress uniforms while astride on horseback, nearly every other portrait showed them in lavish dresses, jewels, and wigs. Catherine was particularly adept at employing female-inflected imagery, presenting herself often as Minerva, a goddess who sprang fully formed from her father's head and had no offspring or consort.⁸²

Despite the abandonment of hereditary succession and its absence from official art, Praskovia's situation did recall an earlier moment in eighteenth-century dynastic history. Nikolai Sheremetev, writing to his young son Dmitri, tried to explain and justify his marriage by invoking Peter and Catherine I: "В ____ году, Государь императоръ Петръ Великій сочетался бракомъ съ пасторскою дочерью бывшею напоследокъ императрицею всероссійскою Екатериною первою"/ "In the year ____, Lord Emperor Peter the Great was married to a former pastor's daughter and future Empress of All Russias Catherine the first" (figure 1.11).⁸³ Catherine I may have been born a peasant and had worked briefly as a laundress for Boris Sheremetev before beginning affairs with Menshikov and, eventually, Peter I. Her coronation as Peter's consort in 1724 legitimized the couple's children, including the future Empress Elizabeth. After Peter's sudden death, his supporters concluded that, in the absence of a named heir, she would best continue her husband's legacy. Speaking at Peter's funeral, Feofan Prokopovich justified the

⁸² For some examples of this phenomenon, see "Quærebat Minervam Sculptor, Catharinam Invenit: Catherine the Great in Sculpture" by Yelena Tarasova in N. Bondil, *Catherine the Great: art for empire* (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), 157-167.

⁸³ RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 72, 1 ob.

decision: “Mother of all Russians! ... Who does not know your God-given, natural sovereign wisdom and maternal charity!” He added that Peter “cared little to have merely a companion for his bed ... he has formed an heir to his crown, power, and throne.”⁸⁴ Catherine’s authority to rule was founded on her physical relationship with Peter, her motherhood of their children, and her long association with him; Prokopovich claimed that her “communion with his wisdom, labors, and various calamities” transformed her, “like gold in the crucible,” from humble woman to Autocrat.⁸⁵

More than any other person, Catherine I provided a precedent for Praskovia Sheremeteva and all the complications and contradictions her life contained. Her mysterious low origins and successful ascension to the throne must have appealed to Sheremetev, who emphasized them in his letter to his son. Nikolai may have claimed elsewhere that Praskovia was descended from Polish nobles and even that his relatives had treated her from the beginning like a noblewoman, but this story was clearly false.⁸⁶ The Sheremetevs had found themselves in an awkward position without much precedent to guide them. Having serf mistresses was completely acceptable, and there was even the ward system to ensure that any resulting offspring could be well provided for. Monarchs had long been able to marry lower class women; Nikolai cited not just Peter but Yaroslav and Yaropolk as ancient examples, and even Elizabeth had lived with a Ukrainian of

⁸⁴ Cracraft, 125.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 70, l. 2. As Smith relates, Sheremetev was insistent enough on inventing noble ancestry for Praskovia that he had a document from 1747 fabricated and added to the family's archives. Smith, 210-211.

humble origins who sang in her choir.⁸⁷ But the Sheremetevs were not powerful enough to do this themselves and needed Imperial permission to legitimize Praskovia and the union. Comparing Praskovia to Catherine set aside the question of her ancestry and proposed an alternative reason for her elevation: her consortion with Nikolai Sheremetev.

The very conspicuous pregnancy in Argunov's portrait serves as proof not just of their physical relationship (like Catherine as "companion" of Peter's bed) but of a public acceptance and even flaunting of her pregnancy that in itself proved her place in the family. In 1776, Catherine II had commissioned the Roslin painting of Natalia Alekseevna at a moment when Paul urgently needed an heir; likewise, in 1803, Nikolai Sheremetev was desperate to clarify the standing of his only legitimate child. The obvious, perhaps even exaggerated pregnancy also legitimated Praskovia. The circumstances of her pregnancy are mysterious; she and Nikolai had been conducting an affair since the 1780s, so it is curious that she should become pregnant only in 1802, when she was thirty-three and too ill to sing. Smith raises the possibility that previous pregnancies were terminated so she could continue performing and forgo the stigma of illegitimate motherhood.⁸⁸ Abortion was considered a sin. In the context of an extra-marital pregnancy, it would have required a penance of up to thirty years of fasting and

⁸⁷ Oleksiy Razum, the singer, eventually because Count Aleksey Razumovsky due to his decades-long involvement with Elizabeth.

⁸⁸ Smith, 155-156. Aleksandr Sumarokov wrote a sonnet in 1755 in the voice of a woman recounting her abortion. Addressing the child who would have been, she clearly articulates the prerogative of honor versus her own desires: "Любовь, сразивши честь, тебе дать жизнь велела / А честь, сразив любовь, велела умертвить." Aleksandr Petrovich Sumarokov, *Stikhotvoreniya: biblioteka poeta*, ed. M. Gorky (Moskva: Sovietskii pisatel 1935), 82. I thank Irina Reyfman for telling me about the poem.

was considered twice as sinful as a married woman's abortion.⁸⁹ By conspicuously highlighting a pregnancy during legal marriage, Argunov's portrait might have quieted rumors other than those about Sheremeteva's origins.

The portrait's odd formal qualities elevate Praskovia Sheremeteva by connecting her to the ancestral past that the Sheremetevs were so preoccupied with constructing for themselves. By 1803, Argunov was painting portraits inflected with hazy colors and soft borders; like Borovikovsky, he emphasized the luxurious surface. The Praskovia portrait harshly departs from the fashionable sentimental idioms of the early nineteenth century, as Argunov deliberately chose archaizing formal elements and strategies. The palette of almost undifferentiated reds and greens is swallowed up by a strange darkness in the middle of the painting. Sheremeteva's face, modeled after an anonymous miniature from several years before, is harshly shaded and her features sharpened and darkened in comparison with the original (figures 1.12 and 1.13).⁹⁰ The floor tips upward in a form of inverted perspective and the planes of the chair and footstool clash illogically with the structure of the room. Rakina has observed that Argunov had some difficulty with linear space but usually concealed it (for example in his parade portrait of Paul) with

⁸⁹ Natalia Pushkareva (ed. Eve Levin), *Women in Russian History: From the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (M. E. Sharpe Incorporated, 1997), 38-39. David Ransel observes that abortion and infanticide were slowly becoming legally differentiated during this period and that the primary sin involved illicit sex, for which abortions served as evidence. He examines the rise of concern for abandoned infants in D.L. Ransel, *Mothers of Misery: Child Abandonment in Russia* (Princeton University Press, 2014). Nikolai Sheremetev would later found a charity hospital in honor of his late wife, noting in the charter: "D'après un testament particulier de ma défunte Epouse, il sera employé pour doter des orphelines, et autres filles indigentes la somme de six-mille roubles." *État et règlement de l'hospice, que sera fondé à Moscou aux frais du conseiller privé actuel et grand chambellan, comte Chérémétoff*, (St Petersburg: Strannopriimnyi dom, 1805), 3-4.

⁹⁰ For more on the sources of the painting, see Rakina (2004), 84-87.

strategically placed drapes; here, perspectival inconsistencies are emphasized thanks to the narratively unnecessary furniture.⁹¹

Adding to the bizarre scene, the bronze bust of Nikolai seems animated, facing the viewer with a smirk as Praskovia stares rigidly to the side. The fluted pedestal supporting the bust echoes Sheremeteva's striped dress, rhyming the two spouses in an eerie, windowless space. Argunov included a bronze portrait bust in his 1812 portrait of Alexander Dmitriev-Mamonov (figure 1.14) and painted it convincingly, creating a smooth and solid counterpart to the portrait's cacophony of rich surfaces. In the Praskovia portrait, the bust serves a similar purpose as the miniature in the other parade portrait, connecting Praskovia to her husband and highlighting her allegiance to him, much as Dmitriev-Mamonov wished to show off his loyalty to the late Catherine. But unlike the portraits within Argunov's other two paintings, Nikolai's bust doesn't serve as a conservative anchor to the painting or a straightforward hierarchical marker. A reworking of an earlier portrait (figure 1.15) but flipped from right to left, the bust retains its model's soft wig, shadowy facial hair, and a jumble of collars and medals unlikely to be translated into sculpture.⁹² Nikolai's expression is stretched into a sneer and his eyes are further narrowed. The result is an almost playful conflation of media that also exudes an uncanny or sinister quality, especially considering the funerary context of the portrait. In

⁹¹ Rakina (2004), 87-88.

⁹² The bust also resembles Argunov's portrait from 1798, now in the Voronezh Museum of Fine Arts (cataloged in Presnova, 117), which is the correct orientation but has different medals and hairstyle and a softer cast to its features. That painting in turn looks a great deal like Ivan Argunov's early 1760s painting of Nikolai Sheremetev as a child. In his portrait of Sheremeteva, Argunov was probably referring not just to one example but to a multitude of prior images.

Rakina's words, this passage exudes "мистический ужас" ("mystical horror") thanks to the "абсолютно живо лицо графа," ("the absolutely alive face of the count") incorporated into the statue.⁹³

These strange aspects have unmoored the painting from Argunov's normal output. Aleksandr Benois called Argunov's portraits "harsh, dry, dull," likely referring to paintings like this one rather than the more conventional portraits from earlier and later in his career.⁹⁴ Mikhail Alpatov also dismissed his technical prowess, focusing largely on his struggles as a serf.⁹⁵ I propose that the painting's strange qualities are deliberate and archaizing, connecting Praskovia Sheremeteva both to Sheremetev ancestors and to an alternative tradition of image-making.⁹⁶ Its harsh lighting, color, and depiction of space have some formal similarities to popular prints as well as strong roots in Petrine imagery.

The painting's provocative coloration and use of space are formally reminiscent of *lubki*, popular prints that proliferated in the eighteenth century. In an atmosphere where history painting struggled as a genre, *lubki* contained some of the most inventive and imaginative approaches to image-making, albeit by anonymous artists who were

⁹³ Rakina (2004), 87.

⁹⁴ "Портреты Аргунова кажутся жесткими, сухими, скучными" Aleksandr Benois (ed. N. Dubavitskaya), *Russkaya shkola zhivopisi* (Moskva: Art-Rodnik, 1997), 24. Benois wrote that Argunov captured the likeness of historically interesting people, including Sheremeteva, and that his best paintings were at Kuskovo.

⁹⁵ Mikhail Alpatov and Valerii Kulakov, *N. I. Argunov* (Moskva: Izobrazitelnoe Iskusstvo, 1975), 5-6.

⁹⁶ Rakina sees the painting's archaizing tendencies as a result of the conventions of portraiture colliding with Sheremeteva's "un-portraitlike" state. She proposes a Northern Renaissance antecedent for the painting, especially the striped dress. Rakina (2005), 98-100.

completely outside the academic system. Nevertheless, the prints circulated widely. Rakina generally dismisses any notion of popular or folk influences on Argunov, who spent most of his youth, as she points out, within a block of the Winter Palace.⁹⁷ But it is possible, without denying his cosmopolitan milieu, to look for exceptional influences on this very out-of-character painting. Lubki were certainly on the low end of the artistic spectrum, but they were not for peasants. The prints were sold on the street in Moscow and at this point in history, had an urban, often middle-class audience.⁹⁸ Some upper-class men collected them. Nikolai Sheremetev is not known to have possessed any according to household inventories, but his friend Dmitri Olsufiev, with whom he corresponded about the Praskovia project, was the son of a famous enthusiast and collector of lubki.⁹⁹ Jacob von Staelin, the head of the arts department within the Academy of Sciences and an admirer of Ivan Argunov, also had a lubok collection.¹⁰⁰ The link to lubki is not entirely direct, and I am not suggesting that Argunov borrowed elements from specific prints. Instead, lubki provided a framework for depicting subject matter with certain valences that were excluded from the academic tradition. This framework involved crude coloring and a distortion of perspectival space.

The lubok and the literary tradition that accompanied it have traditionally been interpreted as a carnivalesque alternative to the European-influenced art of the nobility.

⁹⁷ Rakina (2005), 44.

⁹⁸ I. U. Ovsannikov, *Lubok: russkie narodnye kartinki XVII-XVIII vv* (Moskva: Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1968). 17-18.

⁹⁹ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 216, list 85.

¹⁰⁰ Alla Sytova, *The Lubok: Russian folk pictures, 17th to 19th century*, (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1984). 20, 25.

Dianne Farrell has described medieval and shamanic themes that persisted in print form well into the eighteenth century, even as painting and sculpture became subject to academic norms.¹⁰¹ They also broached topics that were unthinkable in mainstream art, including social climbing and sexual conquest. Lubki showed scenes from plays, general bawdiness, chivalric heroes, and circus freaks. “Black-Eyed Sweetheart, Give Me a Kiss,” a lubok from the middle of the eighteenth century, depicts a theatrical scene (figure 1.16). The female figure stands in a similar pose to Sheremeteva's, stiffly staring off into the middle distance as her patterned dress rigidly billows outward. Tiny shoes protrude from beneath her skirt. Meanwhile, the tiled floor behind the couple recedes improbably behind them, tilting upwards. The colors are bright but rough, applied slapdash over the black ink. In his painting, Argunov refuses to mottle and shade in his usual way, choosing a clashing palette and a vertiginously raked floor that evoke popular rather than academic conventions.

One recurring scene in prints dating from the second half of the eighteenth century features a cook rejecting the advances of a male suitor (figure 1.17). The female cook is related to the figure of Martona, the protagonist of Mikhail Chulkov's libertine novella “The Comely Cook: Adventures of a Lusty Woman” (“Пригожая повариха: похождение развратной женщины”).¹⁰² Martona begins her tale as an impoverished widow who finds work as a cook in a Moscow household. She takes numerous lovers,

¹⁰¹ Dianne E. Farrell, “Shamanic Elements in Some Early Eighteenth Century Russian Woodcuts,” *Slavic Review* 52, no. 4 (1993) and Dianne Ecklund Farrell, “Medieval Popular Humor in Russian Eighteenth Century Lubki,” *ibid.* 50, no. 3 (1991).

¹⁰² M. D. Chulkov, *Prigozhaya povarikhya: Pokhozhdenie razvratnoi zhenshiny* (Eksmo, 2008).

delighting in the gifts and servants they give her and her rise (punctuated by several falls) through Russian society. Despite her flaunting of social norms, she ends up content with a fortune of her own and a loving companion. Olia Prokopenko has linked Martona's story to that of Catherine I, originally named Marta, whose obscure origins and relationships with powerful men made her the subject of gossip and anxiety.¹⁰³ Praskovia Sheremeteva also battled her way to legitimacy and wealth, but not before participating in the libertine theatrical world depicted in lubki and related literature. By borrowing some of the lubok's cruder representational conventions, such as the tilted floor, harsh colors, and the uncanny playfulness of Sheremetev's living statue, Argunov might have been alluding to an alternative imagery that flourished outside the Sheremetevs' palaces but was oddly appropriate to the dramas taking place within.¹⁰⁴ It is also worth noting that after her death, Sheremeteva became the subject of lubki and a related folk song ("Вечор поздно из лесочки") that recounted her first meeting with Nikolai Sheremetev.¹⁰⁵ While this occurred after Argunov's portrait, it does demonstrate the suitability of Sheremeteva's story to the lubok genre.

Argunov's strange formal decisions in the pregnancy portrait can be traced more directly to another Russian precedent that was close to home. At Kuskovo, the

¹⁰³ Olia Prokopenko, "The Real-Life Protagonist of Mikhail Chulkov's "Comely Cook": A Hypothesis," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 2 (2004).

¹⁰⁴ My understanding of this indirect lineage between folk print and oil painting is influenced by Meyer Schapiro's discussion of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*. Courbet was "obviously not trying to revive the conventions of popular imagery" but nonetheless borrowed from it a certain "rigidity" and even "tendencies toward a more primitive form." Meyer Schapiro, "Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naiveté," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4, no. 3/4 (1941), 165-166.

¹⁰⁵ T. A. Selinova, "Obraz krepostnoi aktrisi," *Khudozhnik* 7 (1966), 48.

Sheremetevs had constructed a portrait gallery to house part of their vast collection.¹⁰⁶ The gallery, which is no longer standing, displayed monarchs from Russia and Europe as well as Russian aristocrats and luminaries including Sheremetev ancestors. The effect must have been impressive: a Sheremetev could contemplate Ivan the Terrible, Marie Antoinette, and his own grandparents. Most of the paintings in the gallery were painted by anonymous artists in the second half of the eighteenth century, but because many of the portraits were copies of existing works, the archaic qualities of the originals were preserved and transmitted. Figures from Peter the Great's era (figure 1.18) tend to be flat and frontal, with the same awkward anatomy and schematic mottling that characterizes Nikolai Argunov's posthumous portraits of Praskovia Sheremeteva. Empress Anna Ioannovna, who succeeded her aunt Catherine I, particularly echoes the later Praskovia paintings (figure 1.19). In a three-quarter pose, she stares at an indeterminate point, her body heavily covered by a carapace of ermine and silk. Both her and Praskovia's faces are dry and severely shaded, and despite their different kinds of voluptuousness, they appear flattened.

The portrait gallery and the Praskovia cycle can be seen as joint attempts to historicize the Sheremetev family using archaizing visual idioms.¹⁰⁷ Just as the gallery

¹⁰⁶ The portraits have been published in Natalia Presnova, *Portretnoe sobranie grafov Sheremetevykh v usadbe Kuskovo: albom-katalog* (Moskva: Minuvshee, 2002). A reconstruction of the gallery's layout is on display at Kuskovo until at least the spring of 2017. I am grateful to Ksenia Nemova for showing me the exhibit and answering my questions about it.

¹⁰⁷ Kate Retford has described a similar phenomenon in the British context. "If not an alleged Van Dyck or Lely, the ancestral portrait was not usually viewed as an artwork in the same way as, for example, a classical landscape. It was rather a document, a component of a visual family tree and a device to prompt recollection of the exploits of members of the family." Retford describes how these antique models could be used to

enshrined Sheremetev ancestors among royal families, connecting them with a distant past, the posthumous cycle also honored Praskovia Sheremeteva by linking her to monarchs and noble ancestors. Ultimately, however, the project was not meant to be a sentimental tribute but a practical step toward establishing Dmitri Nikolaevich Sheremetev as the unimpeachable heir to the family fortune and title. And thus it is very appropriate that Nikolai Argunov borrowed not just the rough coloration and mottling of the portrait gallery but also its hollowness. In her parade portrait, Sheremeteva is in an advanced stage of pregnancy, surely the heaviest and roundest she ever was in her short life. But Argunov, despite highlighting the physiological explicitness of her state by bending the stripes of her dress around her abdomen, has flattened her figure. The clashing reds and greens create an optically confusing plane on which it is impossible to perceive protruding or receding depth. Her pointed shoe peeking out from beneath her skirt reminds us that there is a person under the dress, but the shoe is improbably tiny and almost disappears into the carpet. Even her crumpled white shawl and the statue of her husband seem to have more heft and volume. Like Anna Ioannovna, she is all clothes and surface (though not as richly clad), the shape of her pregnant figure emphasized at the cost of the self-possession and presence that earlier portraits showed off.

The painting of Sheremeteva in her coffin is as unusual as the pregnancy portrait. Its subject matter was almost as rare, although posthumous portraiture did have deep roots in pre-Petrine Russia. Parsunae, the first secular paintings of the seventeenth

inform new portraits, which might take scale, coloration, and composition of the antecedent into account. Kate Retford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art., New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2006), 151.

century, depicted dead princes and monarchs. Their frontality, flatness, and stylized physiognomies recalled icon-painting, the dominant art form of the era.¹⁰⁸ But *parsunae*, if not exactly lifelike, were also unconcerned with death. Their subjects have open eyes and alert features; they may no longer be on earth, but these are not images of corpses. Argunov's portrait is morbidly candid; Praskovia is pale and sallow, her eyes sunken, a green tinge coloring her face. She is past her deathbed and already in a coffin, dressed for the grave.

The painting's most direct antecedents are deathbed portraits of Peter the Great, especially those by Nikitin and Tannauer (figures 1.20 and 1.21). Like Argunov's portrait of Sheremeteva, they show their subject reclining and pallid, his body covered by sheets or shrouds. Lindsey Hughes has asserted that these unusually frank depictions of death were intended to affirm Peter's legacy of rationalism and recall his interest in dissection and anatomy.¹⁰⁹ Argunov's portrait also recalls (in function if not in form) Peter's *voskovaya persona*, the wax effigy made by Rastrelli from Peter's death mask and casts of his hands and feet, clippings of his hair, and an articulated wooden dummy.¹¹⁰ Like the deathbed portraits, Peter's wax figure simultaneously evoked Peter's presence and

¹⁰⁸ For more on *parsunae*, see Lindsey Hughes, "Cultural and Intellectual Life (Russia Under the First Romanovs, 1613-1689)," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006), 650-653. *Parsunae* were also sometimes painted from life, with the first documented example of this occurring in 1671. Hughes points out that there is very little stylistic or iconographic difference between *parsunae* of living or recently living men and ancient figures such as Vladimir.

¹⁰⁹ "What Matter of Man Did We Lose?": Death-bed Images of Peter the Great," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 35, no. 1-2 (2008). Peter's interest in physiology manifested itself most conspicuously in his collection of pickled specimens in the *Kunstkamera*.

¹¹⁰ The *persona*, dressed in Peter's clothing, ended up in the *Kunstkamera* near his taxidermied pets and collection of specimens. *Ibid.*, 57.

reminded Russians of his irrevocable death. Argunov's portrait served a similar purpose; it was meant to be hung in the room where Sheremeteva died, and was commissioned at the same time as a reliquary for her hair.¹¹¹ Both projects can be understood as attempts to memorialize the dead woman by preserving the last physical traces of her, and, like the pregnancy portrait, they serve as reminders of the Petrine past and her supposed nobility.

But despite the startling similarity to Peter's deathbed imagery, Argunov's portrait has different aims. Peter's corpse portrayed in paint and wax presaged his looming influence over the rest of the eighteenth century and the conflict over who controlled the traces of his legacy. Argunov's portrait reaches backwards, not just to Praskovia Sheremeteva's fictive noble ancestors, but to her role as a female serf whose body served multiple functions. She was the property of the Sheremetev family; she mastered the corporeal arts of singing and acting; she was the mistress of Nikolai Sheremetev, and later his wife and the mother of his son. The plaque on the frame refers to her eternal soul, but Argunov's painting memorializes her body with morbid candor.

Argunov's posthumous portrait embodies how complex and even paradoxical Sheremeteva's identity was; even as it emphasized the materiality of the body, it accorded her the illustrious honor of a portrait in this genre and protected her from the degradations that could befall the bodies of serfs who attempted to transcend their station. Susan Morrissey, in examining the case of a serf painter who killed himself in 1828, discusses how by the late eighteenth-century, suicide had become a form of protest against

¹¹¹ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4820, list 158.

feudalism and the futility of Russian society.¹¹² As such, Morrissey observes, it became a subversive and illegal act, particularly when committed by a serf, who had neither the legal right to deprive his owner of his own life nor the moral claim to honor that drove unhappy aristocrats to suicide or fateful duels. The serf artist, recently refused manumission despite his owner's previous promise to free him, shot himself while holding an open volume of Voltaire. Nevertheless, his death was recast by authorities as a depraved and arbitrary act and ultimately a crime. Praskovia Sheremeteva, of course, did not choose to die. But Sheremetev's portrait projects made clear that her body and identity were as open to interpretation as that of the serf artist who committed suicide twenty-five years later, and it would have been an easy solution for him to essentially erase her existence, consigning his son to be a ward and marrying a suitable aristocratic woman. And yet for Nikolai Sheremetev, death had always been an opportunity for dramatic realignments and reimaginings; for example, he commissioned plans for a tomb for his parents from Pajou, his own preference for overblown neoclassicism completely overshadowing his parents' tastes.¹¹³ And when his illegitimate son Ivan Yakimov died young, Nikolai's obituary for him, which did not acknowledge his paternity, nevertheless allowed him to express some of the tender feelings he felt for the boy and admiration for his skills in drawing and ballet.¹¹⁴ Praskovia Sheremeteva had successfully risen to the

¹¹² Susan Morrissey, "In the Name of Freedom: Suicide, Serfdom, and Autocracy in Russia," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 82, no. 2 (2004), 268-271. For a discussion of honor and violence, see Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature*, Studies of the Harriman Institute (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹¹³ Erika Naginski, *Sculpture and Enlightenment* (Getty Research Institute, 2009), 132.

¹¹⁴ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4860, l. 1.

pinnacle of the Russian theater world through her own skill, and it is likely that her canniness helped her to secure an unthinkable advantageous marriage for herself. But as with Ivan Yakimov and the elder Sheremetevs, her death allowed Nikolai the final word. Since his preoccupation at the moment was legitimacy for Dmitri, what he devised along with Nikolai Argunov expressed a great deal about Praskovia's place in the family and in society but only hinted at the ambition, talent, and self-possession that had driven her in life.

Somewhere between 1805 and 1807, Argunov may have painted a last portrait of Praskovia Sheremeteva.¹¹⁵ Wearing an elaborate ruffled collar and jeweled headpiece, Sheremeteva gazes indistinctly outward, a jeweled portrait of her husband affixed to her dress. The portrait rhymes with Nikolai Argunov's late 1790s portrait of Nikolai Sheremetev and is nearly the same size. The two spouses sit in similar, muddy monochrome, turned slightly toward each other with placid expressions. This is an extremely legible set of portraits, conveying the closeness of marriage and the splendor of rank and wealth. By 1805, the legitimacy of Sheremeteva and her son was settled and she could be painted in a conventional way. The portrait demonstrates what an anomaly the earlier cycle was — how far Argunov had stepped away from his usual practice to complete a bizarre and compelling record of paradoxical social identities and corporeal truths.

V. Conclusion

¹¹⁵ This painting was originally thought to be from 1801-1803. Its attribution is not entirely certain. Presnova (2005), 127.

The Sheremetevs sometimes used the Argunovs and their other enserfed painters to produce art cheaply and easily, without having to resort to an effortful and potentially expensive process of commissioning paintings from foreign artists (Nikolai Sheremetev's failed attempt to have an Italian artist paint the late Praskovia demonstrates how difficult this could be). But the advantages of serf painters extended far beyond economy and ease. The very fact of owning accomplished artists reflected well on a noble family, and the Sheremetevs played this up especially when it came to the Argunovs.¹¹⁶ By commissioning portraits of family members and intimates from Ivan and Nikolai Argunov, the Sheremetevs demonstrated that their own understanding of themselves and of their identity stretched beyond the fashionable aesthetics of Western Europe that they also embraced. The Argunovs were able to understand and paint the hierarchies and complexities of the Sheremetev household far more astutely than foreign interlopers, and to a certain extent, the Sheremetevs relied on them to portray the ramifications of serfdom, however palatably, in the form of the smiling ballerina, the well-dressed orphan, and the elegant bride. While the Sheremetevs did not always successfully commission and display portraiture that presented a coherent narrative, their engagement with personal and political precedents – or their willingness to let the Argunovs engage with these models – meant that the paintings they commissioned were unique.

As for the Argunovs, it is difficult to gauge their understanding of themselves from the paintings they made on the Sheremetevs' orders. Nikolai Argunov in particular

¹¹⁶ Jacob von Staehlin, for example, in his description of artistic activities of the era mentioned the Sheremetevs' Western painting collection and then transitioned directly to Ivan Argunov, "one of their serfs." According to von Staehlin, Argunov enriched their gallery ("обогастил графскую галерею") with portraits of the "best taste" ("в портретах в лучшем вкусе"). Y. Staehlin and K. V. Malinovsky, *Zapiski Yacobi Shtelina ob izyashnikh iskusstvakh v Rossii* (Iskusstvo, 1990), Volume I, 364.

left scant records of his own interests; even after his manumission, he spent his time making portraits for wealthy sitters, and, if he ever experimented or painted for pleasure, these works do not survive. His Praskovia cycle can be read as an exposure of the contradictions of servitude and the Enlightenment understanding of the individual, with Sheremeteva suffocated and diminished by the weight of meaning that was imposed upon her by her multiple roles in life. But the cycle is also the consummate Sheremetev project despite its oddities, working out in a familial context the many problems of serfdom. Like Praskovia Sheremeteva herself, Nikolai Argunov spent all his artistic energies catering to the Sheremetevs' preferences and in service of their identity-constructing projects. Ivan Argunov, on the other hand, was equally proficient in the type of portraiture that the Sheremetevs demanded, but his personal paintings renounce this imagery completely. His Russian Museum self-portrait contains no reference to the Sheremetevs or Cherkasskys, despite his playful allusions to them in the Annushka portrait and others. The portrait rhymes only with a painting of a woman in a yellow dress, thought to be the artist's wife Marfa Nikolaevna Argunova. Although Ségur worried that proficiency in painting and other art would give Sheremetev serfs a terrible self-knowledge, the Enlightenment evidently didn't inform them of their own unhappiness. That understanding had been there all along; what painting and acting provided was the chance to practice identities independent of serfdom. On stage, Praskovia Kovaleva inhabited the role of a free woman. Nikolai Argunov learned to make fashionable portraits that would provide him with a livelihood after his manumission. And Ivan Argunov, though he died in serfdom, painted himself as an autonomous professional holding the tools of his trade. While the Sheremetevs were busy buying busts of Voltaire, the Argunovs and the most talented of

the theater troupe realized that mastering Enlightenment art could provide a way out of serfdom.

Chapter 2: Through a Little Window: Theatrical Portraits and Performances

I. Introduction

In the process of Praskovia Sheremeteva's posthumous identity creation, her husband Nikolai Sheremetev maintained that her supposedly noble blood had been evident to all since her childhood. This was obviously a fiction, but it is an idea that hints at the difficulty of Sheremeteva's social transformation. The truth — that she was a talented actress who had become a household fixture long before her manumission — was apparently not sufficient to explain her extraordinary rise. Meanwhile, Sheremeteva's former costars also were released from serfdom into lives of financial and social stability. The trajectory of the Sheremetev actresses was gradual and had many causes. Excelling at their profession surely helped the women, just as it helped Nikolai and Yakov Argunov and the senior household administrators who were freed in the early nineteenth century. In this chapter, I will argue that the actresses also adopted elite habits, priming themselves for advancement by integrating into the noble household of the Sheremetevs. Part of this process involved portraiture. By sitting for the Argunovs and other artists, enserfed performers could stage identities for themselves that acknowledged and exceeded their professional role.

Sheremetev serfs who excelled at the arts generally fared well, but this was not always the case throughout Russia. Serfs were initially barred from the Imperial Academy of Arts and even after they were allowed admittance were automatically granted freedom if they graduated.¹ Serfdom and the arts, which the Academy's president

¹ Serf-owners became adept at removing their charges before graduation, when they had acquired a sufficient set of skills but before they were emancipated. "The fall from

referred to as the "free arts," could not conceptually be reconciled.² And when serfs did create art, tales abounded of performing artists feeling their servitude more acutely than their uneducated brethren. A probably apocryphal story that circulated in the late eighteenth century maintained that a serf violinist, recently returned from study in Italy, chopped off his own hand rather than play in bondage.³ The serf actor Mikhail Shchepkin convinced powerful friends to publish tales of his compatriots' struggles. One of these was about a young actress named Kuzmina, famed for the authenticity of her suffering on stage, who became pregnant in a deliberate attempt to die in childbirth, the only way out of servitude she could envision.⁴ And the Sheremetevs' own serf choir master and composer, Stepan Degtiarev, died young after a series of punishments for minor offenses humiliated him and drove him to alcoholism.⁵ These were exactly the scenarios that

euphoria and an exposure to refinement back down to the servile life led many serf artists to disillusion, drink, and sometimes suicide." Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 289.

² "Since all the arts are free," wrote the Academy's first president, Shuvalov, "then serfs are not to be admitted." quoted in *Ibid.*, 288.

³ Stites, 54.

⁴ This is discussed in Laurence Senelick, "The Erotic Bondage of Serf Theatre," *Russian Review* 50, no. 1 (1991), 32-33.

⁵ A. Nikitenko and Helen Saltz Jacobson, *Up From Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia 1804-1824* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 7-8. For more on Degtiarev's work see Carol Bailey Hughes, "The Origin of "The First Russian Patriotic Oratorio": Stepan Anikievich Degtiarev's *Mnin i Pozharskii* (1811)" (UNC Chapel Hill, 1984) and M. Ritzarev, *Eighteenth-Century Russian Music* (Ashgate, 2006), 264-291.

Ségur feared when he visited Kuskovo in 1787 and commented that Enlightenment would only inform serfs of their own unhappiness.⁶

The situation in the Sheremetev household was again more complex than Ségur realized. Nearly all of the principals in the Sheremetevs' theater were freed after Praskovia Sheremeteva's death in 1803 or in Nikolai's will. The opera singer Anna Buyanova (called "the Emerald"), the ballerina Tatiana Shlykova ("the Garnet"), and Sheremeteva herself ("the Pearl") had spent the past few decades performing conciliatory visions of feudal society, sometimes in specially commissioned pastoral operas whose protagonists were Sheremetev serfs. These theatrical productions can be understood as propaganda, which was sometimes glaringly direct. And yet, like the surviving Argunovs, the elite performers of the theatrical troupes were manumitted. Painters and actresses transitioned from creating art on command for the people who owned them to legal and financial independence.⁷ Even during their tenure in the theater, subtle gestures of independence were discernible amidst the propaganda. While the librettos of serf operas were sometime demeaning, performers — and especially women — found ways to assert their identities not just as capable professionals, but as individuals.

⁶ It is worth noting that the Sheremetev serf theater has been perceived by scholars as being less cruel than other troupes run by Russian noblemen. Marc Slonim, for example, singles out the Sheremetev household, where "the atmosphere was more humane and the customs much milder." Marc Slonim, *Russian Theater, From the Empire to the Soviets*, 1st ed. (Cleveland, World Pub. Co., 1961), 29. I am inclined to agree with Marina Ritzarev, who wrote that Nikolai Sheremetev's "approach to his serfs was neither liberal nor sadistic, just rigidly exploitative." Ritzarev, 259.

⁷ Liberated Sheremetev serfs seemed to make their way into other hierarchical and bureaucratic institutions. Nikitenko became a state censor, for instance, and Nikolai Argunov ended up at the Imperial Academy of Arts.

Given the Argunovs' skill at painting social complications, it is not surprising that the most nuanced views of the theater can be found in portraiture. Paintings by Nikolai Argunov and a possible theatrical portrait by Ivan Argunov provide a view of the theatrical troupe that reveals more than the large-scale and self-serving spectacles the Sheremetevs staged between the 1770s and 1800. In this chapter, I will examine four portraits of serf performers: Kovaleva, Buyanova, Shlykova, and the young Ivan Yakimov, Nikolai Sheremetev's illegitimate son. Instead of reinforcing the propaganda of the operas produced by the Sheremetev family, these portraits provide an alternate view of the theater troupe that emphasized themes of social ascent, professionalism, and integration into elite society. Archival evidence suggests that the women's portraits may have been intended to be displayed in their own quarters and were not hung in the Sheremetevs' living space (as the portraits of Annushka Kalmykova and the posthumous Praskovia series were). This context allowed the Argunovs and their anonymous counterparts to eliminate allusions to patronage and the social armature of the Sheremetev family. Instead, the actresses seem autonomous and self-aware. These are women on the rise.

Even the operas performed on the Sheremetev stages, propagandistic as they were, hinted at possible fates for serfs beyond servitude. *Les Mariages Samnites* featured Eliane praising freedom in her breakthrough aria.⁸ In *Aniuta*, performed first in 1781, a serf named Miron rails against his wealthy masters but eventually learns to accept his

⁸ B.F. Du Rozoi and A.E.M. Grétry, *Les mariages samnites: drame lyrique en trois actes et en prose* (Constapel, 1777), 23-24.

station.⁹ "Охти, охти, крестьяне! / Зачем вы не дворяне?" he asks ("Oh, oh you peasants! Why aren't you nobles?").¹⁰ He complains about the laziness of the gentry: "Боярская забота: пить, есть, гулять, и спать. / И вся их в том работа, / Штоб деньги обирать" ("The Boyars' concern: drinking, eating, strolling, and sleeping. And the only work in all that is collecting money"). Meanwhile, he must chop wood until he is exhausted.¹¹ Foreshadowing events in the Sheremetevs' own family, Miron's daughter Aniuta falls in love with a nobleman and dreads marrying the "срамом, уродом Филаткой" ("the awful, ugly [serf] Filat"). Luckily, it turns out that Aniuta is actually a long-lost noblewoman and she is able to marry her aristocratic lover.¹² Although Elise Wirschafter points out that *Aniuta* ultimately affirms social hierarchy and order, it also allows some resentment of this hierarchy to be expressed.¹³ *Aniuta* not only addresses the

⁹ Aniuta was a type, borrowed from Favart's *Annette et Lubin* and Russianized. See Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera: The Tsarina From State to Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53-80. The stock character would be satirized by Radishchev, whose version of Aniuta would be desperately impoverished and in anguish over an arranged marriage that, unlike her fiction counterpart, she is unable to escape. A.N. Radishchev, L. Wiener, and R.P. Thaler, *A Journey from Saint Petersburg to Moscow* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 131-141.

¹⁰ N. Yelizarova, *Teatry Sheremetevykh* (Moskva: Izd. Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia, 1944), 138.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² This is also the theme of *Nina*, in which the titular character finds out that she is actually the daughter of her lord. Upon learning the news, Nina cries "Какое благополучие! Какой трепет! Батюшка, прастите меня, я умру у ног ваших." ("What happiness! What awe! Father, forgive me, I will die at your feet"). Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev, *Arkhiv sela Kuskovo*, vol. 1 (Moskva: Tipo-litografia A. V. Vasilieva 1902), 42.

¹³ E.K. Wirschafter, *The Play of Ideas in Russian Enlightenment Theater* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 87.

anger and discomfort serfs might feel about their position, it also implies that enserfed women were uniquely primed to move between classes with assistance from aristocratic men. This scenario would repeat itself offstage as Nikolai Sheremetev claimed to recognize Praskovia Kovaleva's supposedly noble blood and facilitated their eventual marriage. But the other female stars of the troupe also attained freedom, advantageous marriages, and financial independence, while less celebrated actors returned to domestic drudgery and administration.¹⁴

The elite actresses' social ascent had little to do with any understanding of the arts as a uniquely free discipline. Instead, successful participation in the aristocratic milieu of the Sheremetev household prepared the women for roles beyond serfdom. The process of social transformation is captured in portraits by the Argunovs, who painted the actresses as active agents in their own self-fashioning. Although the institutions that governed them may have been exploitative and abusive, Kovaleva, Shlykova, and Buyanova responded by constructing identities in ways not so different from elite women in Western Europe. The actresses were owned by others, put on display, and expected to be sexually available to Nikolai Sheremetev and perhaps to others. And yet, they had money and rooms of their own. The elite actresses were paid fairly well by the end of their careers; in 1797, Kovaleva received a salary of 300 rubles and Shlykova 53, not including payments for food and clothing.¹⁵ In 1800, the year before her marriage, Kovaleva received a salary of 1000 rubles with an extra 80 for clothing, and Shlykova was paid

¹⁴ Aleksandr Nikitenko's father was one such singer, sent to remote to perform administrative duties as soon as his voice changed. Nikitenko and Jacobson, 8.

¹⁵ Yelizarova, 321.

300.¹⁶ The women lived in private and comfortable quarters and were provided with the best training available in singing, acting, and ballet. Douglas Smith points out the actresses' main dressing room at Ostankino, luxuriously furnished and complete with a pet canary, had a lock on the door, a feature that the men's quarters lacked.¹⁷ The women socialized with aristocrats and lived in the same wing as Sheremetev, gaining fluency in the arcane codes of the Russian elite.

In the absence of first-hand accounts from the Sheremetevs' leading actresses, it is difficult to fathom their mindset as they traversed social chasms. The paternalistic and totalitarian institution of serfdom meant that they were constantly supervised and occasionally punished (which generally was more psychologically than physically harmful, as in the case of Degtiarev, who was humiliated by bureaucratic penalties for his drinking).¹⁸ On the surface, the actresses seemed to thrive as they moved upwards in the Sheremetevs' esteem, gaining social and material benefits in exchange for their

¹⁶ Ibid., 323. Pavel Svinin, a Russian watercolorist who traveled in the United States between 1811-1813, understood the American dollar to be worth 5 rubles during this period. In his diary, he noted that successful American painters such as Rembrandt Peale could charge up to \$100 (500 rubles) for a portrait. This makes an interesting comparison with the performers' salaries and with Nikolai Argunov's receipt of 1000 extra rubles for the Praskovia cycle in 1804. P.P. Svinin, M. Swoboda, and W. Whisenhunt, *A Russian Paints America: The Travels of Pavel P. Svinin, 1811-1813* (MQUP, 2008), 129. The issue is complicated by the existence of two separate types of rubles (paper and silver) with different values; see Dennison, xv.

¹⁷ Douglas Smith, *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (Yale University Press, 2008), 78.

¹⁸ Smith details how vigilantly Sheremetev controlled the troupe, micromanaging their rations and habits and making sure that the women were locked securely in their quarters. The stars were treated significantly better. About rehearsals, Sheremetev wrote: "should there be any laziness, negligence, or resistance in their music studies, then they are to be punished by being forced to keel and put on bread and water, and report to me the slightest incident." Ibid., 149-150.

participation in the theater.¹⁹ Meanwhile, other serfs perceived the actresses to be canny and ambitious. While Nikolai Sheremetev praised Praskovia Kovaleva for her loyalty, a different perspective can be found in the memoirs of Aleksandr Vasilevich Nikitenko, a former Sheremetev serf. Nikitenko successfully lobbied for his manumission in the early nineteenth century. His father, a former choirboy, had witnessed the heyday of the Sheremetev theater and seems to have related to his son a jaundiced view of the affair between Nikolai Sheremetev and Praskovia Kovaleva:

About five or six years before his death he fell madly in love with a serf girl, an actress in his own family theater. Although not a remarkable beauty, she was so clever that she succeeded in forcing him to marry her. They say she was also very kind. And only she could soothe and tame this pitiful madman, who considered himself lord and master of many thousands of people but could not manage his own person. When his wife died, he apparently went completely berserk, keeping totally secluded, even refusing to see his friends.²⁰

Nikitenko stresses that Praskovia Sheremeteva was clever not on stage, but in her manipulation of Sheremetev to her own advantage. The Argunovs, who also strove for higher status and freedom, seem to have recognized something similar in the actresses they painted. Their portraits record confident and self-aware women who created public personae that led to increased comfort and pay and eventually to manumission.

¹⁹ The loyalty and closeness that Nikolai Sheremetev perceived from serfs in his household is exemplified by his instructions related to his affairs after death. Stating that he wanted to be buried with his own ring and that of the late Praskovia Sheremeteva, he wrote that the latter could usually be found near him or in his portfolio. If it could not be located there, he noted that Tatiana Shlykova or the Argunov brothers would probably know where it was. RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4820, ll. 174-175. In some ways, this puts Shlykova and the Argunovs in the position of glorified valets, responsible for keeping track of his valuables. On the other hand, it demonstrates the extent to which Sheremetev trusted them with such a personal request.

²⁰ Nikitenko and Jacobson, 7.

Before looking closely at the Argunovs' portraits, it is worth examining the context in which painters and subjects found themselves. The artifice and performance of the Sheremetev household was not unique in Russia. Yuri Lotman's semiotic examination of the eighteenth-century aristocracy concluded that elite engagement with the West was a self-conscious performance. "The image of European life was reduplicated in a ritualized play-acting of everyday life," wrote Lotman, transforming existence into theater and imbuing even mundane actions with performative force.²¹ Lotman cites examples of noblemen, freed from compulsory civil service, stage-managing their lives and inventing rituals, disguises, and roles to lend meaning to their lives (most dramatic of all was Count Skavronksy, who had his serfs address him only in operatic recitative: "the coachman communicated with him in bass octaves, the postilions in soprano and alto, the footmen in tenor octaves, etc.").²² This is an interpretation of Russian elite life that has influenced scholarship for decades, positioning aristocrats as "foreigners at home, foreigners abroad" (as Herzen posited) whose actions and aesthetic statements were primarily for show.²³

²¹ I. U. M. Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Russian Eighteenth-Century Culture," in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. I. U. M. Lotman, Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, and Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1984), 70.

²² I. Pyliaev, *Staroe zhitie, ocherki i rasskazy* (St. Peterburg, 1897), quoted in Lotman, 80. Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov, author of polemics against what he saw as the decadence and immorality of modern life and a particular skeptic of theater, thought the entire Skavronskii family "глупые и распутные"— "stupid and dissolute." M.M. Shcherbatov and A. Lentin, *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 201.

²³ A. Herzen and D. Macdonald, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen* (University of California Press, 1982), 66, cited in M.L. Marrese, "'The Poetics of Everyday Behavior' Revisited: Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble

There have been challenges of late to Lotman's framework, most notably by Michelle Marrese, who posits a greater degree of linguistic and cultural bilingualism among the Russian aristocracy and questions Lotman's assertion that self-fashioning was the realm solely of aristocratic men.²⁴ But Lotman's model has greatly influenced study of Russian theater from this period and embedded it in the *usadba* (country estate), the site of actual theatrical production as well as the ritualized play-acting Lotman described. Priscilla Roosevelt has situated nobles' theatrical troupes in relation to their alienation from Russian life and "disaffection from reality."²⁵ According to Roosevelt, country estates such as Kuskovo or Ostankino became sites of elaborate pretense and performance, with serfs forced to participate in the fanciful projects of their masters.²⁶

Identity," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, no. Fall (2010), 706. Interestingly, Nikitenko also posited that Nikolai Sheremetev was effete and intellectually idle, his theatrical projects a mere whim: "Like a true noble during the reign of Catherine II, he lived the high life. And that was all he was capable of doing. His name does not appear among the records of a single important event of that remarkable epoch... Among his numerous vassals he was known as a spoiled, capricious despot, not innately evil but terribly corrupted by his wealth. Drowning in luxury, he knew no law but what struck his fancy. Satiety finally reduced him to the point where he was repulsive even to himself, and he became as much a burden to himself as he was to others. Amidst his enormous wealth was not a single object that could give him genuine pleasure. Everything filled him with loathing – valuables, delicacies, drink, works of art, the obsequiousness of numerous lackeys scurrying to anticipate his wishes." Nikitenko and Jacobsen, 6.

²⁴ M.L. Marrese, "'The Poetics of Everyday Behavior' Revisited: Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble Identity," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, no. Fall (2010).

²⁵ Priscilla R. Roosevelt, "Emerald Thrones and Living Statues: Theater and Theatricality on the Russian Estate," *Russian Review* 50, no. 1 (1991), 23.

²⁶ For more on the sinister and uncanny elements of the Russian estate, see E. E. Dmitrieva and O. N. Kuptsova, *Zhizn usadebnogo mifa: utrachennyi i obretennyi rai* (Moskva: OGI, 2003).

Laurence Senelick has examined the provincial serf theater as a site of sexual dominance and abuse, concluding that the aristocratic male's desire to control his environment made the private theater into "a playground for sexual power relationships."²⁷

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott proposes that for slaves, serfs, and other subordinate groups, it is "nearly a physical necessity" to push back against the authority of ruling elites.²⁸ Even when there is no open rebellion, Scott identifies subtle forms of "disguised, low profile, undisclosed resistance," including "disguised discourses of dignity ... gossip, rumor ... and creation of autonomous social space for assertion of dignity."²⁹ Examining Sheremetev serfs with this framework in mind yields many examples of low-level "resistance" or obstruction, most directly articulated in Nikitenko's post-emancipation memoir. Nikitenko recalls himself and his compatriots cheating the Sheremetev family by manipulating expense reports and reimbursements, gossiping about and maligning them, and plotting ways to leave

²⁷ Senelick. 34. Senelick observes that the possibilities of sexual violence permeated later representations of serf theaters, such as Leskov's 1883 short story "The Toupee Artist." Leskov's protagonist is Count Kamenskii, a sadistic nobleman who forces his actresses to dress up as St. Cecilia before raping them. "'Camarine earrings' were both a flattering and repulsive gift. They were the first token of the special honor of being raised for a brief moment to the position of the master's odalisque. Soon after that, and sometimes straightaway, Arkady would be given to order to make the doomed girl up after the theater 'with the doomed look of St. Cecilia,' and this symbolized innocence, all in white... would be delivered to the count's quarters." N.S. Leskov, trans. R. Pevear, and L. Volokhonsky, *The Enchanted Wanderer and Other Stories* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 401.

²⁸ J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 197.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

servitude, all the while presenting a front of compliance and respect to their owners.³⁰ We see the same phenomenon in the few surviving letters by the Argunovs, such as Yakov Argunov's effusively polite letter asking when his manumission paperwork will be complete.³¹ But this pattern of behavior becomes more complicated with the top serf actresses, who were integrated to a surprising degree into the elite social sphere. Characterizing aristocratic or dominant groups in general, Scott writes: "as an integral part of their claim to superiority, ruling castes are at pains to elaborate styles of speech, dress, consumption, gesture, carriage, and etiquette ... This combination of distinctiveness and apartheid creates, as Bourdieu has emphasized, an elite culture that is an illegible "hieroglyph," defying easy emulation by subordinates."³² Kovaleva, Shlykova, and the other "gems" of the opera company were a rare example of serfs who attained fluency in "gesture, carriage, and etiquette," not to mention the material trappings of elite life.³³ This complicates our understanding of the balance of compliance and resistance they engaged in.

³⁰ Nikitenko, for instance, describes how common it was to claim much more money than necessary for travel expenses. "Such was the corruptive effect of slavery: for a long time we did not consider it sinful to fleece the landowners and the state." Nikitenko and Jacobson, 183.

³¹ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1615, l. 11.

³² Scott, 133. This strategy of integration was adopted by Julius Soubise, a former slave who lived in the household of the Duchess of Queensbury. Soubise was a dandy and "visible in the face of official invisibility," adopting elite habits. M.L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Duke University Press, 2010), 57-67. I thank Meredith Gamer for this point of comparison.

³³ Elite signs were borrowed in a less systematic way for "balagan," the carnivalesque form of popular theater that, according to Lotman, relied on beauty spots and culottes to indicate the artificiality of the scenarios on hand. Theatrical *lubki* also show performers in Western clothes. Lotman, 70-71.

I propose that the theatrical portraits served as an expression of identity for the three serf actresses, entrenching them in the elite world that would serve as their path out of servitude while asserting their professional competence and self-awareness, attributes of independence that nonetheless allowed them to thrive within the autocratic hierarchy of the Sheremetevs' serf empire. At the same time, the stakes for these actresses were staggeringly high. By demonstrating their proficiency in the codes of elite life, they were able to win freedom and financial security for themselves and for their families. Meanwhile, the less celebrated singers and dancers of the Sheremetevs' troupe returned to the kitchens and cottages whence they came, their participation in operas and ballets unable to prevent a return to the harsher labor of agrarian servitude.

II. Actresses: Sheremeteva, Buyanova, Kovaleva, Shlykova

The Sheremetev theater project was actually an agglomeration of several troupes. Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetev had set up choirs and small-scale theatrical spectators in the 1750s and 1760s, but the family's reputation and fame were due primarily to Nikolai Petrovich. Nikolai Sheremetev, who had performed with a young Tsar Paul in court ballets, went to Paris on a grand tour in 1772 and absorbed the latest trends and innovations. He also learned to play the cello from François-Marie Hivart, a second cellist at the Opéra, and maintained a decades-long correspondence with him that kept the Sheremetevs up to date about the changing theatrical world in Paris.³⁴ Returning to

³⁴ Hivart also acted as a kind of agent in France, shipping sheet music, costumes, and props. The long and thoughtful correspondence between the two men is striking because Hivart never distinguished himself in the French musical world and was always financially precarious. In 1773, a year after Sheremetev's visit, Hivart was only earning 700 livres per year at the Opéra (other musicians were earning up to 4000). Archives Nationales AJ/13/15.

Russia in 1773, Sheremetev began to build up his own family's theater, eventually overseeing hundreds of performers in opera, ballet, several genres of orchestra (symphonic, brass, and horn), and a choir, not to mention supporting staff who made musical instruments, designed and ran special effects machinery, painted backdrops, and, of course, took care of all the paperwork and administration that such a massive enterprise required. The end result was a theater whose repertoire included French, Italian, and Russian operas, including some personal commissions, and whose reputation rivaled any State theater.

The three surviving portraits of Sheremetev serf actresses show the troupe's most successful performers: Anna Buyanova, or "the Emerald," Praskovia Kovaleva, "the Pearl," and Tatiana Shlykova, "the Garnet." "Pearl" and "Emerald" were the first nicknames, invented by Pyotr Sheremetev before Buyanova's and Kovaleva's debut in 1780, but other star actresses of the theater were eventually dubbed "Sapphire," "Turquoise," "Amethyst," and "Crystal," while male performers were named "Flint," "Marble," "Carnelian," and "Coral."³⁵ These aliases gave the actors a group identity, erasing their patronymics and surnames. They also suggested that the talented stars were prized possessions, much like the gems in the Sheremetevs' mineralogical collections in their *kunstkamer*. The use of jewel names for the women also has an uncomfortably sexual undertone, since precious stones stood in as euphemisms for vaginas in the eighteenth century.³⁶ Although the Sheremetevs did not list a copy of Diderot's *Bijoux*

³⁵ Smith, 51.

³⁶ See Marcia R. Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2009), 84.

Indiscrets in their library inventory of 1812, the abundance of libertine literature in their library makes it possible that this subtext was known to the Sheremetev men.

Although executed by separate artists (Ivan Argunov, an anonymous pastellist tentatively identified as Johann Bardou, and Nikolai Argunov), the three portraits are remarkably similar not only to each other, but to the anonymous 1760s painting of Anna Sheremeteva in "Carousel" costume (figure 2.1). In lavish dress, all four women hold static poses in three-quarters view in front of an indistinct background (figures 1.8, 2.1, 2.2, and 2.5). Their gazes out of the pictorial space destroy any illusion that they might be acting on stage; they acknowledge the viewer, they pose, and they are not absorbed in their roles.³⁷ But although these portraits have an internal consistency or uniformity, they are dramatically different from other paintings of actors and actresses from this period. In Western Europe, portraits tended either to show their subjects in action or as well-dressed, respectable members of society. Sheremetev performers, heavily costumed but motionless and nearly expressionless, are an anomaly among their wildly gesticulating or fashionably clad peers. The Sheremetev theater troupe was also an anomaly, and the portrait series gives some insight into its workings. The serf actresses are presented as competent professionals, not as a cruel social joke or a lurid sexual advertisement. By breaking the fourth wall, the actresses participate in a culture of self-conscious performance that was a marker of aristocracy. Furthermore, the actresses participated

³⁷ Theater's move toward absorptive tableaux is discussed in M. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University of California Press, 1980), 94-96.

themselves in the process of looking at and owning the paintings. This suggests some control over their own lives and public personae.

It may be tempting to classify the three portraits as something more sinister, namely an advertisement of sexual availability to the Sheremetev men and other aristocrats in their circle. The women's direct gazes and the very fact of their being costumed but not actively performing suggests a kind of backstage access that could easily become exploitative. This framing of eighteenth-century acting has been most explicitly explored in Laurence Senelick's "The Erotic Bondage of Serf Theater," which casts the amateur theatricals of bored aristocratic men as a chance to control, display, and dominate vulnerable women. While the Sheremetevs were not as sadistic as many of their compatriots, they did exploit their actresses and other serf women. It is likely that all three of the performers shown in the portraits had sexual relationships with men who legally owned them. Praskovia Kovaleva was in a relationship with Nikolai Sheremetev for at least fifteen years. Sheremetev also had an affair with Buyanova before Kovaleva's professional prime.³⁸ The details of Shlykova's life are a little more obscure, gleaned mostly from her own accounts to Sergei Sheremetev in the nineteenth century, but she was known to have been a favorite of Pyotr Sheremetev.³⁹

Nevertheless, despite the exploitation of women in the Sheremetev household, there is no evidence to suggest that this series of portraits was directly related. In fact, the scant archival records and the context of the Sheremetevs' theatrical paintings suggest that something more complex was occurring. First of all, Anna Sheremeteva's portrait,

³⁸ Smith, 73.

³⁹ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4851, l. 8.

which is virtually identical to the actresses' portraits in composition and content, surely was not meant to advertise ready access to her body. As Rosalind Blakesley observes, the visual idiom of theater in Russia simply did not have the same sexual valences that it did in Europe: "modes of visual expression which in Britain might have suggested a woman of loose morals did not evoke such unfavourable associations in Russia, and could be used to depict women of good standing."⁴⁰ Furthermore, the serf actress paintings make few appearances in household inventories but, at least by 1802, the portrait of Sheremeteva as Eliane was located in her own bedroom.⁴¹ And the complete absence of the Shlykova and Buyanova portraits from household records from this period could be explained if they were also displayed in the private quarters of the women.⁴² While this cannot be confirmed with certainty, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the paintings were intended to be looked at by their subjects and by other serf performers who lived with the Sheremetevs on their Moscow estates — and were not part of the groupings of formal portraits that the Sheremetevs used to map power relationships, like the portraits of the Sheremetev children and Anna Kalmykova in the Kuskovo informal bedroom, since these were clearly inventoried.⁴³

⁴⁰ Rosalind P. Blakesley, "Picturing Adolescence in Dmitry Levitsky's Smolny Portraits, 1772-76," *Art History* 27, no. 1 (2014), 24.

⁴¹ MMU Ostankino 1802 opis, l. 222 ob and Presnova, (2002), 131.

⁴² "The Old House" at Ostankino (where the actresses lived with Nikolai Sheremetev) was inventoried in 1802 and 1809 along with the rest of the estate but a full picture of the actresses' living quarters as they moved between Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1780s-1790s is elusive.

⁴³ Varvara Rakina points out that a series of five oval theatrical portraits was inventoried in the Corner House in Moscow (where the Sheremetevs moved in 1799, after the dissolution of the theater and shortly before the marriage of Sheremetev and Kovaleva) in

The first painting of a Sheremetev actress showed not a serf but Anna Sheremeteva (figure 2.1). Completed after 1766, the anonymous portrait depicts a young woman in a lavish theatrical costume encrusted with gems. Sheremeteva, who died in 1768 at the age of twenty-four, had participated in court performances in front of Catherine the Great along with her siblings and other noble children.⁴⁴ This portrait, however, shows Sheremeteva in the costume she wore for Catherine's 1766 Carousel, an idea borrowed from Louis XIV that had teams of noble participants race in chariots while dressed in fanciful national costume.⁴⁵ The painting, somewhat awkwardly articulated, shows Anna posing gamely under the weight of all the jewels and armor, a neutral expression on her face. Vigilius Eriksen's monumental paintings of the Orlov brothers competing in the same Carousel are wildly dynamic: they show the men charging forward on leaping horses, brandishing weapons as they prepare to race. The scale of the paintings, the background showing stands of spectators, and the dramatic storm clouds rolling in commemorate the size of spectacle as well as the Orlovs themselves. In contrast, Sheremeteva's stance is rigid and still and she is posed in front of a generic, monochrome backdrop. Her participation in the event is commemorated without evoking any of its action, real or idealized.

1809-1810. RGIA fond 1088, opis 9, delo 2724, list 12ob, cited in Rakina (2005), 52. This means that there were more portraits of performers than have survived, but does not clarify the display situation before Praskovia Sheremeteva's death.

⁴⁴ Smith, 18-19. Smith also mentions that Anna's death was considered suspicious, since she was engaged to a wealthy and powerful member of the Panin family. Rumors circulated that another woman enamored of Panin contaminated Anna's personal snuffbox with smallpox. *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Erin McBurney for informing me about the Carousel.

Although the composition of this portrait would be repeated in later paintings of serf actresses, Anna Sheremeteva's situation was wholly different. While her portrait in costume suggests that her roles may have been a point of pride for her and for her family, performing was not a profession for her but rather a facet of courtly social life. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Sheremetevs' eldest daughter participated in the arts in ways that mimicked the activities of the family's serfs. Besides acting, Anna worked on at least one pastel portrait, which showed her father Pyotr Borisovich wearing several medals. As Ksenia Nemova convincingly argues, this unfinished pastel is probably based on a portrait by Ivan Argunov.⁴⁶ Along with the Delapierre portrait after Argunov's painting of Annushka Kalmykova, this is one of the rare instances in which Argunov's work, so informed by copying, was itself copied by a person who outranked him. Anna Sheremeteva's version, unskilled as it is, suggests how important Argunov's portraiture was in the Sheremetev household, so much so that his painting was not just an object of study for a Count's daughter, but a mediation between herself and her father.

The next possible portrait of an actress is Ivan Argunov's 1784 "Portrait of an Unknown Woman in Russian Dress" (figure 2.2). The identity of the sitter is controversial. Richard Stites has proposed that it shows "a wet nurse from the common people" (in ornate clothing that was believed to make a woman's milk sweeter).⁴⁷ This

⁴⁶ Ksenia Nemova, "Neokonchennyi portret P. B. Sheremeteva: k istorii sozdaniia," *Antikvariat* 3, no. 104 (2013). The portrait was originally thought to have been after Rotari, whom Argunov would have copied for a later painting dated to the late 1770s. Nemova proposes that the pastel was left unfinished because the Argunov original was sent to the Academy of Arts in 1766. *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁷ Stites, 333. See Venetsianov's 1830 painting of a wet nurse and child for a similar, though much less elaborate costume. Sharandak connected the existence of Argunov's portrait to the interest of the intelligentsia, such as Kantemir, in the experience of serfs

seems unlikely given that the legitimate Sheremetev children were long grown up by 1784, but Nikolai Sheremetev did have young illegitimate children during this period. Tatiana Selinova observes that the costume appears to be relatively authentic dress worn by peasants in the Moscow region, inconsistent with surviving Sheremetev costume inventories, and suggests that the sitter was a "city woman," possibly a wet nurse, posing in dress that was a little more low-cut than was customary in the country.⁴⁸ An absence of archival evidence relating to the painting's commission or display precludes any positive identification, but the Tretyakov Gallery and Natalia Presnova (who credits O. G. Kovalik for the original idea) suggest that the portrait depicts Anna Buyanova, called "the Emerald," who was the bright star of the Sheremetev theater troupe until Praskovia Kovaleva came of age in the late 1780s.⁴⁹ Buyanova remained a confidante of Kovaleva and an important actress in the troupe until its dissolution. She was freed in 1803 and a marriage was arranged for her with Dr. Lakhman, Nikolai Sheremetev's favorite physician.⁵⁰

Although the costume question is troubling, it is possible that Argunov's painting shows Buyanova dressed for one of the Sheremetevs' self-referential operas. Buyanova

and peasants. N. P. Sharandak, *Ivan Argunov: 1727-1802* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1977), 19-20.

⁴⁸ T. A. Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973), 139.

⁴⁹ N. G. Presnova, *Argunovy, krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*, ed. N. G. Presnova (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2005), 76. Irina Danilova also considered the portrait to be theater-related though she did not identify a specific actress. Irina Danilova, *Ivan Argunov: russkii krepostnoi khudozhnik XVIII veka* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo, 1948), 14.

⁵⁰ RGIA fond 1088 opis 3 delo 216, list 316.

had played a number of pastoral heroines including Aniuta, the recurring protagonist of several works in the Sheremetevs' repertoire. Records indicate that Buyanova wore a silk dress with green stripes in *Aniuta*, and occasionally used pieces from her personal wardrobe, which suggests that the character wore Western European clothing rather than accurate peasant garb.⁵¹ Buyanova, however, is known to have acted in "The Parting: or The Hound Hunt from Kuskovo" (1782), "Vain Jealousy, or the Coachman of Kuskovo" (1781), and "The Gardener of Kuskovo" (1781), self-referential operas that the Sheremetevs commissioned about their own estates and serfs.⁵² These works served as an idealized and pastoral version of Sheremetev serf life. "The Coachman of Kuskovo" and "The Gardener of Kuskovo" were even staged outdoors in the Kuskovo garden's "green theater," and actors gestured at various landmarks that they named in song.⁵³ In this context, where reality and performance were deliberately blurred, authentic dress might have contributed to the mimetic effect. Furthermore, the pose of the woman is so similar to the other actresses' portraits, and her clothing so anomalous in the Argunovs' output, that it seems unlikely that the sitter was a real rural peasant in the lavish palaces of the Sheremetevs or in Argunov's urban studio.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Yelizarova, 227, 254.

⁵² Lia Aleksandrovna Lepskaya, *Repertuar krepostnogo teatra Sheremetevykh: katalog pies* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennyi tsentralnyi teatralnyi muzei im. A. A. Bakhrushkina, 1996), 89-90.

⁵³ Yelizarova, 144.

⁵⁴ Nikolai Argunov did begin his career by painting two "peasants," bearded men in dirty clothing holding drinks, evoking the style of Dutch paintings. And Ivan Argunov painted Lazareva, a wealthy woman of the merchant class who wore traditional clothing like others of her social class (see Presnova, 59). But Argunov's sitter is the only one in firmly identifiable Russian peasant or serf clothing.

The roles that Buyanova would have played emphasized innocence and even ignorance. In "The Coachman of Kuskovo," her character, Liza is astonishingly naïve. "Я в Кускове не бывала ..." she sings, "Отъ отца и матери слыхала, / Что тамъ многое достойно зреть. / Тамъ богатство и проч." ("I have never been to Kuskovo. I have heard from Mother and Father that there is much that is worth seeing / There is wealth and other things").⁵⁵ And what is the first sight Liza should expect to see at Kuskovo? Later in the play, while standing on a Kuskovo stage, Buyanova would have listened to these words from the man playing her lover Likander, describing the pleasures of the Sheremetevs' garden: "Не удастся ли намъ видеть хотя въ окошко того строенія, которое называютъ театромъ.... представляютъ тамъ бояръ и пастуховъ влюбленныхъ" ("we may even see through the little window of that building that they call the theater...there they present boyars and shepherds in love").⁵⁶ Perhaps more than any other character in the Sheremetev theater, this role would have required a negotiation of knowingness and innocence, irony and absorption. The audience would have expected a convincing portrayal of naïveté from Buyanova, and yet the meta-narrative of the play involved the actress herself and her trajectory from humble beginnings to the riches — and the theater stage — of Kuskovo.

The Sheremetev-specific plays evolved from a Russian opera tradition that, in Elise Wirtschafter's words, "did not challenge the institutional basis of master-serf

⁵⁵ V. P. Kolychev, *Tschetnaya revnost ili perevozchik kuskovskoi* (Moskva, 1781), 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. Although Likander basically knows what a theater is, his explanation is played for laughs. He mentions that he'll bring mushrooms and berries to butter up the head gardener so he and Liza can see the operas.

relations" and instead blamed any conflict on the failings of individuals.⁵⁷ Russian opera took many cues from France, including pastoral tropes borrowed and reinvented for the Russian context. *Aniuta*, for example, was inspired by Marmontel's "Annette et Lubin" and Favart's operatic version of the same story. Marmontel's fable concerns extremely sheltered rural protagonists (Annette becomes pregnant by her cousin without understanding her condition or its cause) whose problems the more worldly local aristocrat must put right by arranging an emergency marriage for the pair.⁵⁸ As Amy Wyngaard observes, the story shores up the paternalistic power of the local aristocracy ("C'est notre père à tous," say the lovers of their benefactor) while hinting at the corruption and unfair power system that necessitates the lord's intervention in the first place.⁵⁹ The Sheremetevs' operas that bear the name of their own estates, which were written by their distant cousin Vasily Kolychev, remove the mildly troubling elements (pregnancy, cousin incest) from the genre, preserving the naive protagonists and the backdrop of the Sheremetevs' supposed munificence.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Wirtschafter (2003), 88.

⁵⁸ R.F. Hardin, *Love in a Green Shade: Idyllic Romances Ancient to Modern* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 75.

⁵⁹ A.S. Wyngaard, *From Savage to Citizen: The Invention of the Peasant in the French Enlightenment* (University of Delaware Press, 2004), 91.

⁶⁰ The tropes of eighteenth-century peasant literature would soon be reexamined in more serious ways. Karamzin's *Poor Liza* (1792) begins with a peasant girl in love with a local nobleman, who seems to care for her before indifferently moving on to other pursuits. Liza eventually drowns herself. Radishchev's chapter "Edrovo" in *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* rapturously describes the innocence and unspoiled beauty of another serf girl named Aniuta before recounting her misery in the face of forced marriage, her squalid living conditions, and the general hopelessness of her life.

Inna Naroditskaya has positioned serf theater during this period as an intricate reenactment and resolution of social tensions — a "play of possibilities" onstage and even, in Kovaleva's case, in real life.⁶¹ "The Coachman of Kuskovo" can easily be understood within this context, as fictive peasants within the play find happiness at Kuskovo and the real serf actresses demonstrated to the audience the supposed benevolence of their owners. The Argunovs' paintings did not generally portray rural peasants; there are no conciliatory scenes of people in Russian costume interacting with their masters. And when rank was addressed, it was usually contextualized very clearly within the family microcosm; Annushka Kalmykova holds a print with Varvara Sheremeteva's name and likeness clearly emblazoned on it, while a pregnant Praskovia Sheremeteva is posed next to a statue of her husband. Ivan Argunov's "Unknown Woman," painted three years after the debut of "Coachman," is one of few depictions of Sheremetev serfs in Russian costume, and it rejects background context altogether, causing centuries of confusion about whether this woman was a real peasant or an elite serf actress impersonating one.⁶²

This lack of specificity may have been Argunov's aim. In "The Coachman of Kuskovo," Liza is told that when she arrives at the garden, she can look through an *okoshko* (little window) in the theater and see a scene of boyars and peasants in love.

⁶¹ Naroditskaya, 53.

⁶² Argunov's painting is not the only one from this period to show authentic peasant clothing; Mikhail Shibanov, a serf painter who portrayed Catherine the Great in her traveling robes, executed several genre scenes. In them, serfs go about their daily lives in wooden houses, contextualized by ritual and quotidian detail. See Rosalind P. Blakesley, *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford Historical Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72-73.

Likander promises that the scene will delight her but, because she has not ever heard of a theater before this moment, she will surely not understand the artifice of the scenario. In this portrait, Ivan Argunov paints for an audience well acquainted with artifice. Although he uncharacteristically plays up illusionistic qualities, layering gold pigments in careful brushstrokes that mimic embroidery stitches and coating the sitter's earrings with bright impasto, the woman herself resists mimesis. She does not simulate bemusement or glee and she makes no gesture. She does not speak. Argunov has painted her simply sitting still in a costume (even Selinova acknowledges that the clothing sits unnaturally on this "city woman"), smiling enigmatically. This is the opposite of Liza's "little window," an alternative view of the theater for those who understood it best. It shows no boyar and no shepherdess but a woman who was both and neither. Unlike the clarity of the Sheremetevs' theatrical propaganda, it frustrates and confounds.

A few years later, Praskovia Kovaleva and Tatiana Shlykova sat for portraits in full costume. Kovaleva, the future Countess Sheremeteva, had by this point surpassed Anna "The Emerald" Buyanova as the theatrical troupe's star and was already established as Nikolai Sheremetev's mistress. Shlykova, the leading ballet dancer, was also Kovaleva's intimate friend. She would continue living until 1863, and, although she was manumitted in 1803, she remained with the Sheremetevs until her death, living in her own apartment in St. Petersburg. She raised Praskovia and Nikolai Sheremetev's son Dmitri after he was orphaned and looked after his children as well, including the future Count Sergei Sheremetev, who published his reminiscences of her in 1889 as part of his

vast family history project.⁶³ Because the identity of these women is firmly established and relatively full accounts of their lives are known, it is possible to situate these portraits definitively within the Sheremetevs' theatrical project. The women's poses, however, are similar to Buyanova's impassive stance and are all the more striking given the fanciful costumes worn by each actress.

Praskovia Kovaleva's portrait, which hung in her own bedroom at Ostankino, is a pastel attributed tentatively to Johann Bardou (figure 1.8).⁶⁴ It shows her as Eliane from Grétry's *Mariages Samnites*, her signature role that she performed for Catherine the Great (during her visit to Kuskovo with Ségur in 1787). This is the portrait that Nikolai Sheremetev paid an Italian painter to copy in oil after his wife's death; his displeasure with the result led him to commission Nikolai Argunov's unusual portrait cycle.⁶⁵ The portrait's presence in Praskovia Sheremeteva's own room and her husband's esteem for it show how important it was, even after she had retired from acting due to the progression of her tuberculosis.

Like the other theatrical portraits (Shlykova, Anna Sheremeteva, and potentially Buyanova), this pastel is remarkable for its absence of gesture, movement, speech, and facial emoting. In Western Europe, the mimetic power of actors and actresses seeped into their portraits; consider Hogarth's portrait of David Garrick as Richard III, Bosworth

⁶³ Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev, *Tatiana Vasilevna Shlykova* (1889). Sergei Sheremetev also compiled and edited the document collection at RGADA that has provided the fullest account of the Sheremetevs' and Argunovs' lives.

⁶⁴ N. G. Presnova, *Portretnoe sobranie grafov Sheremetevykh v usadbe Kuskovo: albom-katalog* (Moskva: Minuvshee, 2002), 130.

⁶⁵ Rakina (2004), 84.

Field convincingly hazy in the distance as Garrick feigns horror and despair. Zoffany's portrait of Garrick also captures him in a moment of dramatic gesture with an urban backdrop that is not definitively a stage. Reynolds' portraits of Sarah Siddons show her in separate modes: as a Muse, gesticulating and surrounded by swirling mist, and then sitting calmly in fashionable clothes.⁶⁶ In the British context, writes Shearer West, "the function of the theatrical portrait was not to preserve accurately an actor's performance, but to *suggest* such a performance for largely commercial reasons."⁶⁷ The resulting portraits advertised not only actors' talents but their taste. Garrick commissioned his first theatrical conversation piece from Zoffany only after Zoffany had painted him on the grounds of his Hampton estate. West links Garrick's involvement in fashionable theatrical portraits with his trajectory toward gentility, a social ascent that manifested itself aesthetically in the form of his collections and patronage.⁶⁸

Portraits that blurred the line between lived and assumed identities were usually not of professional performers but elite women posing as mythological characters. Philippe Le Leyzour observes that Nattier's painting of Madame de Chaulnes as Hebe is neither Madame de Chaulnes exactly nor Hebe, but a "portrait as," with the noblewoman

⁶⁶ See "Crafting the Siddons Legend" by Robyn Asleson in Robyn Asleson et al., *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999).

⁶⁷ Shearer West, *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

self-consciously assuming a seductive role.⁶⁹ The duchess' direct eye contact with her viewer and the physiognomic (though idealized) specificity of her face shatter the illusion of a conventional mythology painting despite the thunderbolt-bearing eagle and clouds. This is a painting of a woman choosing to pose temporarily as an mythological figure, a luxury that her rank allows her. Higher strata of noblewomen could take the game even further, choosing more imaginative or meaningful alter egos, such as the marquise de Pompadour's self-fashioning as Friendship as her relationship with Louis XV evolved. Portraiture could convey not just a woman's status, but her own role in shaping and forming alternative identities.

The closest European parallel to the Sheremetev actresses was probably Emma Hamilton. Hamilton also experienced a meteoric rise from the lower classes to nobility (and an equally dramatic fall). She was an active participant in her own ascent, fashioning herself onstage and off as a new type of performer. Her performances extended to portraiture, for which she posed in costume in ways that were much more expressive than the static poses chosen by the Sheremetev actresses. But Hamilton's portraits were also a part of her trafficking. As Marcia Pointon describes, Sir William Hamilton became preoccupied with the then Emma Hart, his nephew's mistress. Hamilton at first requested portraits of Emma, then, "having been sent the portraits, he is offered the portrait subject ... Running alongside and simultaneous with this negotiation is a much larger negotiation about property into which the deal involving the unknowing and objectified Emma is

⁶⁹ Philippe Le Leyzour, "Myth and Enlightenment: On Mythology in the Eighteenth Century" in Colin B. Bailey et al., *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to David* (New York Fort Worth: Rizzoli; Kimbell Art Museum, 1992), 24.

absorbed."⁷⁰ The example of Hamilton is instructive because it demonstrates the difficulties involved when women in a vulnerable social position performed and posed for powerful men. This makes it all the more remarkable that Praskovia Kovaleva's portrait appears to have stayed in her own possession until her death and that there is no record of other theatrical paintings being passed from Nikolai Sheremetev to other aristocratic men.⁷¹

Relative to Western Europe, there is a dearth of Russian theatrical portraits from this period despite the popularity of opera. While this is partially attributable to the more moribund market for portraiture relative to that in London or Paris, it also reflects the lower status of Russian actors, among whom many were serfs. An exception was Fyodor Volkov, an actor and merchant's son who was granted nobility by Catherine in 1763 and given an estate with 700 serfs.⁷² In the same year, Anton Losenko (who had studied with Ivan Argunov) painted a portrait of him that anticipates the portraits of Sheremetev serf actresses (figure 2.3). Volkov smiles serenely in front of a neutral backdrop. His red cloak suggests a costume and the sword in his right hand also alludes to the stage. In his left hand, he holds a plain theatrical mask, a symbol rather than an authentic

⁷⁰ M.R. Pointon, *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture, 1665-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 208.

⁷¹ As Blakesley has demonstrated, this is a troubling aspect of the relatively non-sexual Smolny portraits, especially the case of Glafira Alymova. Alymova was pursued by Betskoy, who commissioned a portrait of her playing the harp and may have hung it in his own home. Alymova refused him. Blakesley, "Picturing Adolescence in Dmitry Levitsky's Smolny Portraits, 1772-76," 30-33.

⁷² M. A. S. Burgess, "The First Russian Actor-Manager and the rise of repertory in Russia during the reign of Empress Elizabeth Petrovna," in *(Gorski Vijenac): A Garland of Essays Offered to Professor Elizabeth Mary Hill*, ed. E.M. Hill, et al. (Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970), 82.

accoutrement of his profession. Sartorial and iconographic nods to acting were enough; Volkov evidently didn't wish to be painted while playing a particular role.

Portraits of serf actors practically did not exist. In 1821, the Yusupov family had Nicolas de Courteille paint their serf singer Anna Borunova (figure 2.4). The resulting portrait shows Borunova standing at a piano that is covered with sheet music. Her white dress, a few years after such revealing garments had gone out of style in France, shows the contours of her body, and de Courteille has emphasized the delicacy of her facial features. She looks to the side, apparently interrupted mid-rehearsal. The sinister implications of this portrait are borne out by the practices of Nikolai Yusupov, Borunova's owner and the director of a serf ballet and theater troupe that had rivaled the Sheremetevs'. Yusupov, in Herzen's words, "reduced love for women to a sort of voracious gourmandise" and his choir was known as the "Yusupov Seraglio."⁷³ Performances relied upon the sadistic possibilities of serf theater; dancers were forced to strip on stage at a signal from Yusupov and he bragged of being able to whip them.⁷⁴ De Courteille evokes Borunova's vulnerability in this system by drawing attention to her physiological slightness and unsteadiness, down to the pliancy of her slender, almost translucent fingers.

In contrast, Praskovia Kovaleva is depicted in literal armor. It is surprising that a serf would be portrayed with such a direct gaze and serious expression. And it is even more surprising that this portrait hung in her own quarters for herself to look at. Perhaps not coincidentally, *Mariages Samnites* involved Eliane's own slippage between roles as

⁷³ Quoted in Stites, 225.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

she impersonated a man to save her lover in battle. But in the pastel, Kovaleva is less playing a character than posing as a professional, the tools of her trade visible but captured in a moment of rest. Her gaze is more direct than Anna Sheremeteva's, and she fills almost the whole space of the portrait. Despite her chronic illness, her body is robust and erect, covered but not subsumed by her costume. Her eye contact with the viewer suggests both self-awareness and a sense of confidence that is lacking in Borunova's portrait; Kovaleva may be on display but she returns the viewer's gaze directly.⁷⁵ It was all very well for Sarah Siddons to be painted as a Muse or as Lady Macbeth, since her livelihood and reputation depended on her convincing portrayal of these characters, but Kovaleva's aims in sitting for a portrait were different. The pastel shows not her mimetic virtuosity but her ability to pose as Countess Anna Sheremeteva had done several decades before. Each woman was commemorated in costume that linked her to Catherine and a moment of public glory (the Carousel and the performance of *Mariages Samnites* witnessed by Catherine and Ségur) and each wears her clothing casually, as if no special gesture or pose were required from them. It is impossible to know whether Kovaleva was echoing Sheremeteva deliberately or not, but the portrait does suggest that she was already prepared to pose and behave like a noblewoman.

Nikolai Argunov's portrait of Tatiana Shlykova is very similar in size, composition, and soft coloring to Praskovia Kovaleva's Eliane pastel (figure 2.5); Rakina

⁷⁵ Writing of Quentin de la Tour's portraits of Mme de La Pouplinière (Françoise-Thérèse Buiton des Hayes), Elise Goodman describes the striking effect of the sitter's direct gaze as she practices music and concludes that his "homage to this serious female musician and steadfast patroness... foreshadows by nearly a decade — its personal and penetrating cast notwithstanding — his more famous pictorial tribute to Mme de Pompadour." Elise Goodman, *The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour: Celebrating the Femme Savante* (University of California Press, 2000), 107-110.

deems it a "pendant."⁷⁶ Shlykova's dance instructor was Charles Le Picq, a disciple of Noverre, who advocated ballet's shift to mimesis and "Roman pantomime."⁷⁷ Shlykova performed pastoral mimetic roles (as in opera, Aniuta was a recurring character) and probably participated in the "national ballets" (called Turkish, Spanish, "naval," and American) staged by Sheremetev during her prime.⁷⁸ This is Nikolai Argunov's first confirmed portrait (his first paintings may depict peasants but have a strong genre element) and it marks his debut, at age nineteen, as the Sheremetevs' chief portraitist. Ivan Argunov's last known paintings date from the late 1780s, and henceforth he would be busy with stewardship and administration work. The facture of Nikolai Argunov's portrait is softer than most of his father's work, the diaphanous texture of Shlykova's sleeve and the luminosity of her pearl earrings hazy compared to Buyanova's precisely painted kokoshnik and beads. The painting is almost a mirror image of Kovaleva's pastel portrait, and the softness results from Argunov's attempt to harmonize with the earlier example (though there is no record of the two being hung side by side). Argunov borrowed from Kovaleva's pastel the simple composition of the earlier portrait and the sitter's direct engagement with her viewers. Shlykova, who has a hint of a smile on her face, simply sits and watches, despite the energy and skill she brought to her roles onstage. Her professional life is key to the portrait (why else paint her in these clothes?)

⁷⁶ Rakina (2004), 43.

⁷⁷ For more on Noverre see I.F. Guest, *The Ballet of the Enlightenment: The Establishment of the Ballet D'action in France, 1770-1793* (Dance Books, 1996).

⁷⁸ Lepskaya. 110-111. Inventories survive for the American ballet's scenery and list an American izba, Virginian trees, and a Virginian backdrop. See RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 65, l. 40-40ob.

but no exceptional gesture, narrative moment, or expression was deemed necessary for this painting.

If the portrait is unusual for an actress, it is even more so in the context of servitude. There is no way to tell that this is a portrait of (or, for that matter, by) a serf. While the costume alludes to serf theater, Anna Sheremeteva's Carousel portrait from the 1760s shows that elite women could also be painted in this manner of garment. Shlykova does not appear in a subservient position to her social superiors, as slaves and servants were commonly portrayed, nor does her grooming or dress suggest low rank. Like Kovaleva, Shlykova fills up nearly the entire space of the painting, her posture is straight, and her gaze is direct. Other Argunov portraits eschew humiliating tropes for serfs (such as appearing in a service role) but still enmesh them in the power structure of the family; here, Shlykova is oddly distant not just from her patron owners, but from the stage. With unusual lightness, Argunov has painted convincing tulle and satin that puffs up around her torso, occluding what must have been an athletic and professionally expressive body. She is portrayed not to show off her skill but to match Kovaleva, the two actresses mirroring each other in front of an indistinct ground.

Shlykova was freed after Praskovia Kovaleva's death but did not follow the path of the other elite serfs who left the household. She lived in a suite of private rooms in the Fountain House and at one of the Sheremetevs' country houses near St. Petersburg. Her conversations with Sergei Sheremetev, Dmitri's son and Praskovia and Nikolai's grandson, sparked his interest in his ancestors and inspired the many volumes he compiled about his family history, including a short biography of Shlykova herself that was published in 1889. Sheremetev praised the woman who had helped raise him as

devout, but his account of her flirtation with the proprietor of an English store in St. Petersburg, her pride in her furniture and private rooms, and her reluctance to return to Moscow, even for a visit, hint at a more complicated and perhaps conflicted character than Sheremetev was willing to acknowledge.⁷⁹ Whatever her motivations, Shlykova established herself as the virtual head of the Sheremetev household for many years, living an unconventional life and apparently answerable to no one. Argunov's portrait captures the erect posture and wry expression of someone who, whatever her plans were in 1789, would not be a serf ballerina forever.

III. Ivan Yakimovich Yakimov (1780-1804)

In 1804, a year after he was widowed, Nikolai Sheremetev experienced another loss when his illegitimate son Ivan Yakimov died at the age of twenty-four. Yakimov was a serf who had not been officially recognized as a family member or given the name Remetev and the privileges associated with quasi-legitimacy. Like Praskovia Kovaleva, he had spent his short life in the Sheremetev serf theater, but unlike her, he was never manumitted. Nikolai Sheremetev, clearly grieving for his son but unable or unwilling to acknowledge him, wrote a eulogy for the young man. Besides praising his generosity and sweet temperament, Sheremetev wrote of his "gift for drawing with a pen and with paints," his skills at sketching heraldic emblems, and his importance in the serf ballet troupe where he had excelled in the role of Cupid, dancing with a garland of roses and

⁷⁹ Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev, *Tatiana Vasilevna Shlykova* (1889). 10-11, 15, 17. Sheremetev said that she kept a good relationship with the merchant, who had wooed her, but didn't marry him. Sheremetev added that he didn't know whether it was true, but she may have promised his grandfather (Nikolai Sheremetev) never to abandon Dmitri or get married. *Ibid.*, 17. Late correspondence from Shlykova (1848-1862) reveals that she communicated with church officials and donated to monasteries. RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 798.

charming the audience.⁸⁰ Nikolai Argunov had painted him in this guise in 1790, when he was about ten years old (figure 2.6).⁸¹ Sheremetev's insistence on the young man's artistic abilities suggests that praising a serf's talent could stand in for more conventional expressions of affection and respect. Yakimov was, at least in theory, deemed worthy of a lengthy obituary not because he was the Count's natural son, but because of his education and accomplishments.

Ivan Yakimov's portrait is different from those of his fellow performers. He is the only one to be portrayed on stage, his pose conveying that he is mid-performance. He smiles but his gaze is fixed to his right. This painting of a child roughly ten years old shows a dancer whose talent had already distinguished him on stage. Nevertheless, his age and his unstable social position prevented him from participating in the self-conscious identity fashioning of Shlykova, Kovaleva, and Buyanova. Argunov blurs fictive and material elements in a portrait of a serf whose own life contained equally ambiguous qualities. The result pays homage to his skill while conveying some of the artifice of Yakimov's brief life and the multiple roles he was required to perform.

Yakimov's biography touches upon some of the oddities of the Sheremetev serf world. According to genealogical documents compiled by Sergei Sheremetev in the late nineteenth century, his mother was Anna Ivanovna Yakimova, and his father, at least

⁸⁰ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4860, ll. 1-2.

⁸¹ The portrait was previously thought to be of Ivan Lazarev until 1973, when N. R. Kostikova established that archival documents (such as Nikolai Sheremetev mourning his son) suggested strongly that it was Yakimov. N. R. Kostikova, "Novoe ob "Amure" N. Argunova," *Iskusstvo*, no. 3 (1973), 68-69.

officially, was a Kuskovo garden apprentice.⁸² Two of his brothers, including a goldsmith's assistant, were subject to obrok (quitrent) and were obliged to pay the Sheremetev family 25 rubles a year. Another brother was a violin maker at Kuskovo and was not required to pay obrok. At age two, Yakimov was taken in as a "ward" of the Sheremetevs. According to Sheremetev's account in this obituary, he was removed from "the poor situation of his parents." During his time in the theater, Yakimov was paid less than the elite actresses; in October of 1797, for example, Praskovia Kovaleva was paid 300 rubles, Anna Buyanova 100 rubles, Tatiana Shlykova 52, and Yakimov 30.⁸³ He lived to celebrate the first birthday of Dmitri Sheremetev, Nikolai and Praskovia's son, and his father noted that he gave the baby a porcelain cup and a snuffbox.⁸⁴ His illness was long and necessitated lengthy interventions from foreign doctors, and Sheremetev dutifully noted the long list of medicines that had been tried.⁸⁵ Yakimov died in March of 1804. Sheremetev commissioned both an elaborate grave and a monument in his memory and wrote to his Moscow administrator Andrei Agapov with instructions to tell his mother the news. "Comfort her in her grief," Sheremetev decreed, and set aside 5000 rubles for her support.⁸⁶

⁸² RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4863, list 2.

⁸³ RGADA fond 1287, ed khr 4820, ll 53. This does not take into account the women's clothing allowances or any of the performers' room and board.

⁸⁴ RGADA fond 1287, ed khr 4860, list 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 10-18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 9.

On stage, Yakimov assumed roles that blended fact and fiction, including a ballet called "Vaniushin," commissioned by Nikolai Sheremetev and titled after an intimately diminutive form of his first name.⁸⁷ This suggests that Yakimov's dance performances were less about pantomime in the sense that Noverre understood it than about self-expression and self-presentation. The ballet also serves as a remarkable contrast to the practices of elite Sheremetev actresses, who assumed nicknames offstage and, while acting, embodied diverse roles and characters. Yakimov, on the other hand, seems to have depended on his actual identity to inform his performances on stage.

Even Argunov's portrait, which includes a rare glimpse at a decorated Sheremetev stage, downplays Yakimov's mimetic skills. Although the boy stands on stage, seemingly in the middle of a performance, Argunov emphasizes the artifice of his pose and setting; Rakina calls his body "awkwardly painted" and the arrangement of the bow and arrow "naive."⁸⁸ His bow is strung with a ribbon rather than a string, his wig is slightly askew, his Cupid wings distended stiffly while his feet remain planted on the ground. Yakimov's face is muted and whitened as if with powder while his tunic and trousers seem to have a life of their own. Flesh-toned, wrinkled, and baggy, the costume covers nearly all of the child's skin, a luxurious but unconvincing replacement. The painting represents an inverse of the actresses' portraits, whose female sitters' knowing gazes and abstention from gesture cut through the gaudiness of their costumes. Here, Yakimov is absorbed in his task but the artifice of the situation is plainly on view.

⁸⁷ The ballet was first performed in the late 1780s/early 1790s, Lepskaya, 109-110.

⁸⁸ Rakina (2005), 54. Rakina points out that Yakimov's right hand was originally outstretched in a "banal" gesture that Argunov later modified.

Argunov's insistence on stagecraft echoes the Levitsky *Smolianki* portraits, some of which show the young girls of the Smolny Institute on stage, performing as they would have for their patroness Catherine II. Rosalind Blakesley has identified these portraits as a groundbreaking representation of adolescence, as the girls were able to inhabit a novel space between childhood and the demands of being an adult woman.⁸⁹ In the extreme environment of their boarding school, the girls were cut off from their parents and immersed in study of science, humanities, art. Levitsky painted them brandishing attributes of their accomplishments and engaging bodily with their studies. Holding a harp or operating a scientific instrument, or even mid-stride in the middle of a ballet, they smile and gaze directly outward. One painting alone in the series shows girls absorbed in each other and in their task. Yekaterina Khrushcheva and Yekaterina Khovanskaya, a little younger than most of the other students in the series, stand on stage in front of a painted backdrop (figure 2.7). Khrushcheva cradles Kohavnskaya's chin in her hand and the classmates look at each other intensely. They are mid-performance but it is the artificiality of the scene rather than the girls' mimetic abilities that infuses the painting. Khrushcheva's boyish costume fits her awkwardly and seems to have been adjusted to cover her legs. The greenery in the foreground is clearly two-dimensional and even the background trees are unusually roughly painted, their blotchy leaves signaling that they are a painting of a painting.⁹⁰ The girls' childishness and unconvincing mimicry are

⁸⁹ Blakesley, "Picturing Adolescence in Dmitry Levitsky's Smolny Portraits, 1772-76."

⁹⁰ Levitsky was not very interested in landscape but took a meticulous interest in the leaves, twigs, and roots in his 1773 portrait of P. A. Demidov. Blakesley observes that the leafy setting might be a reference to a public promenade undertaken by Smolny students that year. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

presented in a charming light. After all, despite their exceptional education, they were not destined to be professional actresses but wives and mothers with a circumscribed public life. Their engagement with the theater is ephemeral, an aspect of their adolescent identity rather than a serious vocation.

Ivan Yakimov was too young in 1790 to present himself in any radically different guise than what was expected or demanded of him in the theater. The large painting would have cemented his status as a favorite in the household, but, without his father's full acceptance, his future was uncertain. While the Remetevs eventually left the Sheremetev household for careers or relatively advantageous marriages, it is unclear what would have happened to Yakimov had he lived. Sheremetev's account of him stresses his sweetness and his participation in the family's art projects, from the ballet to the carefully drawn Sheremetev heraldic shields that Yakimov made in honor of his legitimate half-brother's birth. Argunov's portrait shows a child giving his all, surrounded by an artificial world as ephemeral as the role he played. This painting's departure from the actresses' formula reveals how effective that formula was at removing its subjects from the stage and everything it implied.

V. Conclusion

The Sheremetev theater, like the career of the Argunovs, is a case study of art under duress. Nikolai Sheremetev managed to distinguish himself by producing operas that received acclaim and that did not indulge in the sadistic excess of his contemporaries. For the performers and supporting staff of the theater troupes, however, artistic endeavors were forced labor. Many were recruited as children and subjected to a system of coerced work, social control, and worse. The muted expressions assumed by

the elite actresses in their portraits might give rise to horrifying speculation about the exploitative treatment they received.

And yet, despite the demeaning and abusive nature of the master-serf relationship, the three actresses in the portraits managed to find their way out of serfdom, a rare result indeed. Like Nikolai Argunov, they used their artistic talent to rise amidst the constraints of the Sheremetev household and eventually to leave serfdom. The portraits helped them on their way, revealing possibilities beyond the stage even as their social trajectory depended on their work there. As for Yakimov, he would perhaps have been freed in his father's will if not before. Because he died so young, he never had the chance to lead a life independent of his family. The Sheremetevs generally enjoyed sentimental representations of childhood; Varvara Alekseevna Sheremeteva, for instance, decorated her boudoir with French pastels of small girls clutching pets and dolls.⁹¹ On stage, in his costume and wig, Yakimov looks as content as any of these children. But Nikolai Argunov's portrait reveals a certain uneasiness with the artificial setting, the boy's baggy satin skin, and the flat sky behind him. Despite the child's smile, he is hard at work. And unlike his older colleagues, he does not necessarily seem to realize it.

⁹¹ L. V. Syagaeva, *Kuskovo* (Moskva: Tritona 2012), 127-129.

Chapter 3: The Shabby Camera Obscura: Space and Serfdom

I. Introduction

Shortly before the secret marriage of Praskovia Kovaleva and Nikolai Sheremetev, Kovaleva's poor health and the associated decline of household theatrical activities prompted the couple to take up residence in Moscow. In 1799, Sheremetev bought a mansion at 8 Vozdvizhenka Street called the "Corner House" and moved there with Kovaleva, Tatiana Shlykova, and a few other intimates.¹ With them came some of the family's possessions, including books and *kunstammer* objects.² Two generations later, Count Sergei Sheremetev published a compilation of Corner House library inventories from "before 1812" that serve as the most comprehensive record of the Sheremetevs' intellectual life from this period.³ The document lists thousands of books and print compilations, including three separate copies of the *Encyclopédie*, volumes by Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, and Locke, countless theatrical prints, notes, and publications, erotica, fashion plates and books such as *L'art de la coiffure des dames françaises*, Hamilton's and D'Hancarville's Greek vase volumes, "tableaux de la Revolution

¹ For an account of the Sheremetevs' move to the Corner House, see D. Smith, *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (Yale University Press, 2008), 201-203.

² The Sheremetevs maintained *kunstammers* in St. Petersburg (inventoried in 1762) and Kuskovo. Only partial inventories survive so it is difficult to know where exactly the Moscow objects came from. See RGIA Fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1294 for the St. Petersburg inventory, which focuses mostly on paintings, stones, and porcelain.

³ *Opis biblioteki, nakhodiashcheisia v Moskve, na Vozdvizhenke, v dome grafa Dmitriia Nikolaevicha Sheremeteva, do 1812 g.*, Sankt Peterburg: Tipographia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1883 (1812).

Française," a collection of Hogarth engravings, and travel memoirs.⁴ The inventories also listed some of the family's viewing devices and tools. These included a magic lantern, many mirrors, six microscopes, six telescopes, nine "viewing tubes," a machine for tracing portraits, a device with a mirror for copying pictures, a "camera clara" (described as "ветхая" or "shabby") and a camera obscura (also shabby).⁵

Unfortunately, no records remain to tell us whether the camerae were shabby from use or from neglect. If the Sheremetevs passed time by looking at their environment through tubes or in mirrors, they did not preserve their memories or impressions. Even fewer documents survive about the Argunovs, who would surely have been interested in these devices. But this silence is perhaps not surprising given the Sheremetevs' relative apathy about representations of their environment. No drawings or paintings of palace interiors survive and there are very few projects that depict their gardens or land. Although they were a family who spent a fortune on their palaces and grounds, priming their summer estates for ostentatious spectacles, the Sheremetevs never had themselves painted in a favorite garden pavilion, looking out over their parterres, or posing in a boudoir.⁶ Instead, portraits by the Argunovs and others show Sheremetevs in generic,

⁴ Ibid., 10, 12, 31, 41, 57, 65, 66-68, 73, 91, 100, 102, 120, 122, 127-128, 170.

⁵ *Opis biblioteki, nakhodiashcheisia v Moskve, na Vozdvizhenke, v dome grafa Dmitriia Nikolaevicha Sheremeteva, do 1812 g.*, 586-588. The ownership and use of such instruments was also common in Western Europe; see Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment, Entertainment, and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994). In the Russian context, the practice of collecting and using scientific tools can be traced to Peter I's *kunstkamera* collection (see O. Neverov and Emmanuel Ducamp, *Great Private Collections of Imperial Russia* (New York: Vendome Press, State Hermitage Museum, 2004), 13-19.

⁶ As a sign of how much the family was willing to spend on fancy gardening, Nikolai Sheremetev tried to entice his British gardener Roman Manners back to Russia with a

perspectivally unfeasible settings. If the Argunovs ever experimented with a camera obscura or a hand-held mirror from the library, the results cannot be found in their paintings.

This chapter will examine the Sheremetevs' rare visual representations of their land within the context of Russian landscape during the late eighteenth century. It will also resituate the Argunovs' work within this framework. The Sheremetevs' two major landscape projects, a set of garden prints by Mikhail Makhaev and Pierre Laurent (figure 3.1), and an atlas of land holdings surveyed by Ippolit Novikov and illustrated by serf artists (figure 3.2), both show the family's preoccupation with instruments and devices that mediated their perception of space and terrain. Telescopes, camerae obscurae, and surveying tools provided supposedly objective ways for aristocratic viewers to see and understand. This interest in the science of optical viewing was a fundamentally elite activity in eighteenth-century Russia.⁷ Yet land was inextricably associated with serfdom. Serfs could be linked to plots of land in ways that could be both restrictive and protective.

salary of 5000 rubles in 1802 (by way of contrast, Nikolai Argunov received the remarkable sum of 1000 rubles about a year later, which represented five years of his usual pay). See RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4820, list 114. In the same year, Sheremetev put in an order for about 2200 rubles worth of trees and supplies for the garden, including pineapples (which accounted for nearly half that sum), "American trees of various sorts," "English trees of various sorts," "Persian trees, the very best," apricots, cherries, pears, apples, and roses. Ibid., listy 106-107.

⁷ An example of the association between surveying and social standing is Leonty Stanishchevsky's portrait of the child Aleksey Aleskeevich Turchaninov with surveying equipment, gesturing toward a mine. The portrait was completed during a period when Turchaninov's father was moving upward through society, attaining first personal and then hereditary nobility due to his contributions to science and society. My knowledge of this subject is thanks to Anna Graber, "The Art and Science of Minerals: The Lapidary Factory and Mineral Collection of Aleksei Turchaninov," in *ASEEES* (Washington, DC, 2016).

Serfs provided most of the agricultural and horticultural labor that shaped the Sheremetevs' terrain. And serfs participated in making the garden prints and atlas. All of these factors meant that the land and its representations were sites of uneasy encounters between serf and lord.⁸

The Sheremetevs' art projects usually depicted serfs as naive viewers who were sometimes comically uninformed about what they were seeing. In the Makhaev and Laurent engravings, serfs (or at least visitors in lower class Russian dress) cannot access the privileged vantage points of their aristocratic counterparts. In operas commissioned by the family, rustic shepherds and shepherdesses visit the Sheremetevs' park at Kuskovo and sing frankly about their ignorance of garden conventions. And in the Sheremetevs' "Atlas of Allotments," rural peasants lack the instruments and tools that would allow them to understand the land the way surveyors — and atlas readers — could, in precise demographic and geographic detail. Serfs served as foils to more sophisticated viewers, and their ignorance added an additional layer for elite audiences to perceive: part of the pleasure of looking at a landscape was looking at serfs or peasants who did not have the same elevated viewpoint.

This disdainful understanding of serfs' abilities might seem at first to explain the absence of perspectival space in paintings by Ivan and Nikolai Argunov. As serfs, they were not allowed to study at the Academy and were educated piecemeal, never exposed

⁸ The potentially sinister social intersections in gardens are the subject of Thomas Newlin's chapter on Andrei Bolotov "The Muzhik in the Garden," which explores Bolotov's elision of serf laborers in his representations of agronomy in T. Newlin, *The Voice in the Garden: Andrei Bolotov and the Anxieties of Russian Pastoral, 1738-1833* (Northwestern University Press, 2001).

to a curriculum that emphasized geometry and perspective.⁹ Their rank also would have prevented them from using optical tools as a leisure activity the way the Sheremetevs and other aristocrats did. But even taking into account these social considerations, it is odd that space within the Argunovs' portraits is so confined, even as less acclaimed Sheremetev serfs participated in the garden print project. Surely a glimpse of garden parterres or a magnificent enfilade would have conveyed much about the Sheremetevs' wealth, rank, and taste, qualities they were keen to emphasize in general. About a generation later, landscape and architectural contexts did appear in Sheremetev portraiture, but only after the Argunovs were freed. Kiprensky painted Dmitri Nikolaevich Sheremetev, Nikolai and Praskovia's son, posing in a long hallway in the Fountain House.¹⁰ Borovikovsky painted a posthumous portrait of Nikolai Sheremetev, positioning him in front of the Moscow orphanage that was the primary work of his last years.¹¹ And anonymous artists painted landscape views of Ostankino in the 1830s,

⁹ Not that the Academy was a particularly good place to learn perspectival technique; many students found their coursework lacking. Fyodor Alekseev notably removed himself to Venice in order to model himself after Piranesi and Canaletto so he could paint sweeping urban views of Moscow and St. Petersburg. See Maria Ivanova Androsova, *Fedor Alekseev, 1753-1824* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1979).

¹⁰ Kiprensky had himself been born a serf. He lived in the Sheremetevs' Fountain House in St. Petersburg between 1823 and 1828, painting his famous portrait of Pushkin there in 1827. His stay was the subject of the exhibit "Орест Кипренский в Фонтанном доме" (Orest Kiprensky at the Fountain House) at the Museum of Theater (Sheremetev Palace), 21 December 2011 - 19 February 2012.

¹¹ For more on the hospital, see *État Et règlement de l'hospice, que sera fondé à Moscou aux frais du conseiller privé actuel et grand chambellan, Comte Chérémétoff*, (St Petersburg: Strannopriimnyi dom, 1805).

perhaps inspired by Venetsianov and his circle.¹² The decades in which the Argunovs were active, however, yielded very little attention to painting landscape and specific places directly, and the Argunovs themselves engaged with space almost entirely via other paintings.

The lack of landscape background in Argunov portraits is not surprising given the period. Portraits of tsars tended to be situated in front of fictive or generic backdrops and it was not until 1794 that Borovikovsky painted Catherine in the garden at Tsarskoe Selo, with her monument to the victory at Çesme behind her (figure 3.3). This proved to be a memorable way of portraying Catherine that made its way into literature when Pushkin introduced her as a character in "The Captain's Daughter" as a modest woman strolling by the water with her dog.¹³ Borovikovsky's portrait was both psychologically and historically allusive, since the column behind Catherine evoked the naval victories of her reign. The painting was a rarity, however; even though French queens and consorts had themselves painted in favorite corners of Versailles and landscape as an independent

¹² The Venetsianov School brought about a change in both free and serf artists' approach to landscape. Grigory Soroka, an enserfed painter who studied with Venetsianov and eventually killed himself after a dispute with his former owner in the 1860s, serves as an interesting counterpart to the Argunovs, a generation or two earlier. Soroka's paintings demonstrate his interest in the specific topography and details of his surroundings, from the gardens of his owners to the room where he worked. Unlike the Argunovs', his portraits are essentially devoid of social markers. Dmitri Sarabianov maintained that Soroka, being a serf, had special closeness to the land. Dmitrii Vladimirovich Sarabianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant Garde, 1800-1917: Painting - Sculpture - Architecture* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990), 56.

¹³ The captain's daughter, Maria Ivanovna, travels to Tsarskoe Selo to beg for clemency for Petya, her lover who accidentally fell in with Pugachev. Wandering in the garden, she comes upon Catherine and her little dog. Details have been changed because the story is set almost twenty years before Borovikovky's portrait. Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, *Kapitanskaya dochka* (Sankt Peterbourg: Knigopechatnaya Schmidt, 1907), 196.

genre thrived in Britain, there was not much of a market for it in Russia. Nevertheless, small glimpses of specific buildings and views did make their way into Russian portraiture, for example in Levitsky 's painting of Prokofi Demidov and Borovikovsky's paintings of Mirza Kuli Khan and Daria Derzhavina.

In Western Europe, gardens were already sites of escape where private life could flourish unobserved. This phenomenon is most evident in Watteau's paintings of secret festivities, such as "Perspective (View Through the Trees in the Park of Pierre Crozat)." Despite the title, the perspectival view is occluded by dense trees that hide Crozat's intimate friends far away from the oppressive rituals (and clear sightlines) of Versailles.¹⁴ Even at Versailles, relief could be found in forested patches away from the main allée. Boucher's portrait of Mme. de Pompadour has her tucked away in a small and private bower, while Marie Antoinette constructed English gardens and small-scale buildings in order to socialize in peace.¹⁵ The Sheremetevs, whose elaborate follies and pavilions may have echoed those in Western Europe, seem to have considered the garden a much more public space. Even though their Moscow estates represented a retreat from the court life of St. Petersburg, this disengagement was temporary, lasting only during the summer months. Gardens were used and indeed designed to host and impress Russian rulers.

¹⁴ See Nicholas Mirzoeff's "The Flickers of Seduction: The Ambivalent and Surprising Painting of Watteau" in Mary D. Sheriff and Antoine Watteau, *Antoine Watteau: Perspectives on the Artist and the Culture of His Time*, University of Delaware Press Studies in 17th- and 18th- Century Art and Culture (Newark: University of Delaware, 2006).

¹⁵ Marie Antoinette's missteps in this project are illuminated in Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine De' Medici to Marie-Antoinette*, Harvard Historical Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 158-213.

Kuskovo was visited by Catherine several times, events that were inscribed in the garden itself as monuments and, for good measure, inserted into Makhaev's and Laurent's print series.¹⁶ Ostankino, planned and built by Nikolai Sheremetev, represented a more decisive move away from court since he preferred to devote his energy to theater.¹⁷ But even this estate had details invented to impress the ultimate guest. When Tsar Paul visited, it is said that trees lining the road to Ostankino were pulled down in sequence as he traveled toward the palace, revealing the usadba as if a huge curtain were being pulled aside.¹⁸

Representations of Sheremetev land are best understood in this context of ostentation and autocratic power. The Makhaev and Laurent prints and the later Atlas each reveal aspects of terrain that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Assisted by machines and devices, they provide knowledge that is ostensibly accurate and precise. The Sheremetevs used these representations to understand their vast holdings, which included land and people, and to share this privileged view of their property with a select few. But the two visual projects, which were made by serfs as well as free artists, also hint at certain anxieties. The Sheremetevs needed their serfs to assist with these projects

¹⁶ Although Catherine visited after the preparatory drawings were complete, a figure that looks like her can be seen in the Hermitage plate and an elevation of the column celebrating her visit was also included.

¹⁷ This reluctance to perform civil service earned the scorn of some serfs, including Aleksandr Nikitenko. Sheremetev did perform some service throughout his life. A. Nikitenko and Helen Saltz Jacobson, *Up from Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia 1804-1824* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 6.

¹⁸ S. Lyubetsky, *Selo Ostankino s okrestnostyami svoimi: vospominanie o starinnykh prazdnestvakh, zabavakh, i uveseleniyakh v nem* (Moskva: Russkikh vy i domostei, 1868), 16. The incident is described in Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 143.

just as they needs serfs to administer, discipline, and organize themselves. The fiction of patriarchal protectiveness was belied by the educated administrative corps who oversaw hundreds of thousands of their brethren, by artists who mastered "the free arts," by "capitalist serfs" who owned serfs of their own and ran dozens of factories, making huge profits that the Sheremetevs themselves occasionally plundered.¹⁹ Both the Kuskovo prints and the Atlas were projects that represented the consolidation of many people's observations. This compilation of data (sometimes gleaned with machines or devices) allowed the Sheremetevs to use their serfs in concert to see for them, to analyze for them, to map for them. Each project encompasses the scientific and the anecdotal, and they are both voyeuristic. The Sheremetevs, by looking closely at the pages of each volume, could see not just their land holdings but also traces of their human capital and how those serfs supposedly perceived the land.

II. Kuskovo

Beginning in the 1740s, Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetev and his new wife Varvara Alekseevna (née Cherkasskaya) began remodeling their country estate at Kuskovo, a plot of land east of Moscow. This usadba would be the family's center for entertainment and leisure until the 1790s, when Ostankino was built. Kuskovo can be understood as part of the flowering of summer estate culture that followed the emancipation of the nobility

¹⁹ Leonard Blum examines the case of Nikolai Sheremetev's relationship with his serf E. Grachev, a textile manufacturer. Sheremetev borrowed 10,000 rubles from Grachev in 1793 and another 5,000 rubles in 1794 in order to pay some of his massive debts. Grachev bought his freedom in 1795 in exchange for 135,000 rubles, his factory, his land holdings, and his own serfs. But he had hidden assets for this very eventuality and remained wealthy, managing to reestablish his textile business in short order. See Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia, from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 174-175.

from obligatory civil service in 1762, although its earlier genesis and the fact that Pyotr Sheremetev continued to carry out various official functions somewhat complicates this interpretation.²⁰ The gardens and grounds were designed with entertainment in mind, and Kuskovo hosted massive spectacles on summer Sundays, drawing crowds from Moscow and the surrounding regions.²¹ The garden also allowed more private pleasures restricted to the Sheremetevs and their elite guests, notably in the form of numerous pavilions. These structures are notable for their diverse themes and included Italian, Dutch, Chinese, and American-style buildings, an orangerie, menageries, aviary, shell grotto, hermitage, outdoor theater, and numerous alleys and parterres. This stylistic exuberance mirrored Imperial garden trends, as Catherine littered Tsarskoe Selo with many pavilions, water features, and other amusements, and even installed a rollercoaster at Oranienbaum.²²

Kuskovo represented a grandiose moment in Russian garden history, its huge scale and obvious expense more memorable to its visitors than any individual feature. Passing through in 1803, Karamzin was not charmed by the deserted estate. "Чего стоилъ Кусковскій пруд," he wrote, "Хорошо взглянуть на него; но здорово ли жить на берегу страшной, водяной массы, почти неподвижной?" ("What was the cost of Kuskovo? It's good to look at it, but is it healthy to live on the shore of this terrible,

²⁰ See A. Schönle, *The Ruler in the Garden: Politics and Landscape Design in Imperial Russia* (Peter Lang Pub Incorporated, 2007), 113.

²¹ P. R. Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 140.

²² J. Cracraft and D.B. Rowland, *Architectures of Russian Identity: 1500 to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 71.

watery expanse, almost motionless?"²³ Karamzin might have resorted to hyperbole about the size of the pond but his views on Kuskovo's lack of hominess accorded with its owners; the Sheremetevs, according to their nineteenth-century descendants at least, preferred their more modest estate at Markovo.²⁴ Karamzin also was perceptive in his observation that Sheremetevs had designed Kuskovo to be "good to look at," a priority that was obvious to him even when the gardens were empty.

Although the Kuskovo grounds and palace do not appear in eighteenth-century paintings, the Sheremetevs did commission a series of garden prints, called "Représentation exacte des édifices et du jardin, qui se trouvent dans une des maisons de plaisance nommée Saïlo Kouskova, appartenant à Son Excellence monseigneur le comte Pierre Borisowitz de Cheremettoff." In 1768, Mikhail Makhaev came to Moscow and with a team of draughtsman, among them probably Sheremetev serf artists, used a camera obscura to draw various views of the garden, including birds-eye views of the ensemble from two directions (figures 3.1 and 3.4).²⁵ In the 1770s, after Makhaev's death, the drawings were sent to France and were engraved by Pierre Laurent. The project, finished by around 1778, consists of a title page, two maps of the grounds, an elevation of a column commemorating one of Catherine's visits, and twelve garden scenes. These include two perspectival overviews of the grounds and ten views of noteworthy

²³ N. M. Karamzin and V. P. Muraviev, *Zapiski starogo moskovskogo zhiteliya: ilzbrannaya proza* (Moskovskii rabochii, 1986), 265.

²⁴ RGADA fond 1286, opis 1, ed. khr. 4812, l. 92. Markovo no longer exists.

²⁵ For the timeline of the prints, see M. A. Alekseeva, *Mikhail Makhaev: master vidnogo risunka XVIII veka* (Sankt Peterburg: Zhurnal, 2003), 227-229. Andrei Mironov, an architect, might have assisted.

monuments, such as the shell grotto and Chinese pavilion. Bound copies of the prints were kept in the Sheremetevs' library and separate prints, listed in storage inventories of 1785, suggest that they might have been displayed individually at some point.²⁶ Later, some of the plates were copied in oil by the Sheremetevs' painter Gavril Molchanov and re-engraved by Andrei Mironov.²⁷ The copper plates for the series, apparently sent back from France, were also kept in the Sheremetev's library and appear in the 1812 inventory of the Corner House's *kunstkamera*.²⁸ As with many Sheremetev projects, there is a lack of documentary evidence surrounding the prints that impedes interpretation. It is unclear whether the figures were part of Makhaev's original drawings or were added later by Laurent, who would perhaps have been influenced by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince's orientaling engravings of Russian life.²⁹ Pyotr Sheremetev's pleasure with the result, however, seems clear enough given his dissemination and reproduction of the prints; Andreas Schönle has cited Sheremetev's presentation of the prints to Kurakin upon his visit to Kuskovo as part of the nobility's project of self-fashioning through gardens and representations of gardens.³⁰ And no matter where the figures originated, they echo

²⁶ RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 68, l. 11.

²⁷ Alekseeva, 236.

²⁹ *Opis biblioteki, nakhodiashcheisia v Moskve, na Vozdvizhenke, v dome grafa Dmitriia Nikolaevicha Sheremeteva, do 1812 g.*, 588. Serf administrators seemed interested in the value of the copper, noting the plates' weight in pounds as well as the subject matter.

²⁹ See M. Mervaud, D. Bakhuys, and M.P. Sorensen, *Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (Metz, 1734 - Saint-Denis Du Port, 1781): Le voyage en Russie: Collections de la ville de Rouen* (Musée des beaux-arts, Cabinet des dessins, 2004).

³⁰ Schönle, 113. Some of Kurakin's prints are cataloged in Irina Yefremova, "Prazdniki v usadbakh: Lyublino, Ostankino, Kuskovo, Arkhangelskoe," (Moskva: MGOMZ, 2014), 78 and 96.

themes from the Sheremetevs' theatrical repertoire, providing a visual counterpart to Kolychev's operatic description of visiting and viewing the Kuskovo gardens.

Makhaev was best known for his engraved "perspectives" of St. Petersburg that feature urban crowds as well as architecture, and the Kuskovo prints reflect his earlier work, populating the improbably linear gardens with tiny visitors and workers. The Makhaev and Laurent prints present what appears to be a garden where upper and lower class Russians mingle harmoniously. The series also gives credit to Fyodor Argunov, the enserfed architect who designed some of the garden's structures (and Ivan Argunov's cousin). The frontispiece states: "Строенія изобретены разными славными Архитекторами иностранными, а многія и Домовымъ ЕГО СІЯТЕЛЬСТВА Русскимъ Архитекторомъ же Федоромъ Аргуновымъ" and repeats the phrase in French: "Les Batiments sont de l'invention de divers fameux Architects étrangers et plusieurs par l'Architecte Russe de la Maison de son Excellence Theodor Argounoff."³¹ Yet despite this emphasis on harmony between Russian and foreign talent, the print series presents an unabashedly elitist way not only of seeing the garden — but of seeing. The "representation exacte" promised by the prints and the note that "toutes les vues sont dessinées avec les regles de la Perspective" allude to a kind of looking that was

³¹ The term "домовой" or household appears frequently in Sheremetev documents and refers to serfs in the family's immediate circle. Although Argunov did design some of the garden pavilions, including the grotto, it was disingenuous to give him so much credit when much of Kuskovo was the work of others. The main palace, for instance, was the work of Karl Blank (built 1769-1775). Charles de Wailly, a French architect, modified the design of the facade in 1773. See L. V. Syagaeva, *Kuskovo* (Moskva: Tritona 2012), 42-43.

considered unfeasible for serfs, despite serfs' involvement in the project and in other artistic endeavors commissioned by the Sheremetevs.

The garden architecture featured in the prints is the sort of fanciful folly that Lotman identified with elite behavior: "the walk from the 'little Dutch house' to the 'Italian' house at Kuskovo signified a change of behavior type and speech."³² But the print series hints at no such semiotic shift. Instead, groups of visitors wander through the garden paths, gesticulating with delight and surprise at the sights of Kuskovo. And curiously, these viewers consist of upper and lower class Russians, some in fashionable French clothing and others in traditional Russian dress. The exact social identity of the people in non-Russian clothing is unclear. Some may represent merchants, who continued to wear non-European clothing well into the nineteenth century.³³ Whoever they are, there seems to be a distinct class of leisurely visitors in Russian clothing that are distinct from the few depictions of poverty in the print series (a man in generically tattered clothes receiving alms in the church plate and a bearded hermit feeding deer in the forest pavilion plate). For example, the canal pavilion scene (figure 3.5) depicts a group with two women in kokoshniks and a man in a tunic, cloth boots, and a beard. A

³² I. U. M. Lotman, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Russian Eighteenth-Century Culture," in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. I. U. M. Lotman, Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, and Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1984), 81. Lotman does not go into detail about how exactly speech and behavior would have changed during this walk, but the Dutch House was small and casual, a cozy domestic space with a prominent kitchen, while the Italian Pavilion housed antiquities and study space.

³³ See C. Ruane, *The Empire's New Clothes: A History of the Russian Fashion Industry, 1700-1917* (Yale University Press, 2009), 152. Catherine II reestablished some forms of Russian dress into court attire in 1782 and occasionally had herself painted in sarafans and kokoshniks, but the stark division here between Russian and Western modes of dress suggests a strict social divide.

couple stands nearby, the man clad in a fur-trimmed hat with a sword by his side (figure 3.6). His gesture mirrors that of a woman in a Western European dress to his right; she is speaking with a bewigged man in culottes. While the Russian figures may have represented Laurent's version of Russian ethnography, they are still notable for their visible social difference from the foreign or aristocratic couple nearby — and the identical nature of their reactions.³⁴

The encounter also calls to mind the Sheremetevs' self-referential operas, which were commissioned and performed a few years after the Makhaev and Laurent prints were finished. Staged outside in the open-air "Green Theater," these operas took advantage of their setting and casting to meld fiction and reality. Sheremetev serf actors played the roles of fictional serfs encountering the garden for the first time. In "The Coachman of Kuskovo," peasant women are excited to visit the gardens at Kuskovo but are confused about what they might find. When they are informed that there is a Parnassus, a temple to Apollo, one of the shepherdesses asks "What are Apollo and Parnassus?"³⁵ In "The Gardener of Kuskovo," a sort of post-script to "The Coachman of Kuskovo," the protagonists have finally arrived at the estate. "Когда по саду пойдем," the gardener explains to them, "хоть хозяина найдем. Не робейте...гулять смейте. Он тем лишь и доволен, что гулять всякой волен" (when we walk through the garden, we may find the owner. Don't be shy — dare to stroll about. He's quite pleased that everyone

³⁴ The presence of Catherine the Great in the Hermitage plate suggests that the Sheremetevs were at least somewhat involved in the creation of the figures.

³⁵ V. P. Kolychev, *Tschetnaya revnost ili perevozchik kuskovskoi* (Moskva, 1781), 41.

is free to wander").³⁶ The gardener, presumably gesturing from the stage toward visible Kuskovo landmarks, describes the highlights of the estate:

Покажу вам грот прекрасный,
Его нутрь из раковин витых,
И всю мою оранжерею,
Где зимой весна бывает.
Эрмитаж и дом голландский,
Покажу итальянский дом,
Все беседки и итишник с прудом.³⁷

I will show you the beautiful grotto,
Its interior of twisted shells,
And my whole orangerie,
Where there's spring during the winter.
The hermitage and the Dutch House,
I'll show you the Italian House,
All the pavilions and the pond.

The gardener must explain certain aspects of the garden to the rural visitors in language they can understand; the orangerie and grotto especially are terms that must be defined for them. But also notable is the gardener's relative erudition and the possessive "my" as he describes the orangerie. Possibly a serf, he serves as a mediator between the world of the pleasure pavilions and the rustic shepherds whom he welcomes to the garden.³⁸ On stage, this character of a gardener played by an elite serf actor, extolling the beauty and accessibility of the Sheremetevs' garden, would have served to advertise the family's munificence.

³⁶ N. Yelizarova, *Teatry Sheremetevykh* (Moskva: Izd. Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia, 1944), 144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ The Sheremetevs' hired Western Europeans as head gardeners. This character, who speaks Russian and is acquainted in some way with the male peasants of "The Coachman of Kuskovo," appears to be Russian.

The depiction of labor in the print series is played down. Makhaev and Laurent include only a few scenes of the vast effort it would have taken to maintain the Kuskovo garden.³⁹ In the orangerie view (figure 3.7), a pair of gardeners sweep the path (figure 3.8). While they are not as exquisitely clad as the two aristocratic men strolling aimlessly nearby, they are beardless and wearing culottes and short jackets, markers of modernity. By the Italian pavilion (figure 3.9), a young worker in a similar outfit carries a potted plant (figure 3.10). The work in both cases is light and the gardeners do not seem to be supervised. The downplaying of manual labor was, of course, a common tactic of garden and landscape representation throughout Europe and elsewhere in Russia. Russia's leading agronomist, Andrei Bolotov, painted watercolor scenes of the gardens he managed at Bogoroditsk that show upper-class visitors enjoying the various garden features. Thomas Newlin, noting the near absence of serfs or laborers in Bolotov's views, equates these watercolors with Pushkin's "подвижные картины" (moving pictures), a mode of seeing and enjoying the countryside without pausing to contemplate and perhaps to stumble upon uncomfortable truths.⁴⁰

Although the Kuskovo engravings gloss over the realities of labor and servitude, they do enable and encourage close looking in one important respect. On the roof of the Italian Pavilion, a bewigged man in a French-style jacket looks out over the garden through an optical tube, either binoculars or a telescope, perhaps one of the instruments

³⁹ This is to be expected in imagery of gardens. See also Thomas Newlin, "Moving Pictures: The Optics of Serfdom on the Russian Estate," in *Picturing Russia : Explorations in Visual Culture*, ed. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

that was later cataloged in the Corner House inventory (figure 3.11). The lone figure on the pavilion is looking at the garden in an elite way: from above, using an apparatus, and with the ability to magnify and focus in on features or people of interest. This way of looking alludes to the prints themselves, which provide an impossibly detailed — and optically distorted — view of Kuskovo. The equipment used by Makhaev and his team of serfs stretched and expanded the Kuskovo gardens, creating an improbably wide view of the terrain (the scale of the buildings in the pavilion prints is also too grand). This was similar to Makhaev's approach to urban printmaking; part of the appeal of his St. Petersburg series was its exaggerated vastness. His city "prospects" were avidly collected by city residents who did not mind topographical discrepancies. Print-owners even increased the drama of these views by coloring them, cutting out windows and stars, and lighting them from behind with candles.⁴¹ While the Sheremetevs do not appear to have used their prints in this way, the optical distortions, inflating their estate to such a monumental scale, would likely have served as a new and glamorous way to envision their lavish garden and to pore over the vignettes and details within them.

The use of optical devices was an established way for elite Russians to differentiate their viewing experience from those of the lower classes. Writing in 1807, Gavril Derzhavin described the pleasures of viewing his estate in "To Eugene: Life at Zvanka":

Иль въ стекла оптики картинныя места
Смотрю моихъ усадьбъ; — на свиткахъ грады, царства,
Моря, леса, — лежитъ вся міра красота
В глазахъ, искусствъ черезъ коварства.

⁴¹ G.Z. Kaganov and S. Monas, *Images of Space: St. Petersburg in the Visual and Verbal Arts* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 25-26.

Иль в мрачном фонаре люблюсь, звезды зря
Бегущи въ тишине по синю волнь стремленью:
Такъ солнцы в воздухе, я мню, текуть горя,
Премудрости ко прославленью.⁴²

Through optic glass, most picturesque of views I scry
Of my estates — on scrolls, the cities and kingdoms
With forests and the seas — Earth's splendors all reside
In eye, displayed through cunning windows.

By lantern's magic then I marvel at the stars.
They trace the billows' dark-blue wake in silent coursing:
In just this way, think I, ablaze do flow the suns,
Thus Wisdom's radiance endorsing.⁴³

Just before this cosmic vision of his land, Derzhavin has described more earthly pleasures: coffee, chess, and archery ("Тутъ кофе два глотка; схрапну минут пятокъ; Тамъ въ шахматы, въ шары иль из лука стрелами").⁴⁴ He also mentions the joy of witnessing his serfs bathing, "Or from the crystal waters, pools, 'mid sylvan meads, I stand in blessed shade, nor sun nor man observing, Afar I hear the lads — at hand, the splashing maids, And own a quickening secret" ("От солнца, от людей под скромным осененьем, Там внемлю юношей, а здесь плесканье дев, С душевным неким восхищеньем").⁴⁵ It is the optical devices, however, that lead to enhanced perception for

⁴² Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin, *Sochineniya Derzhavina, chast II* (Sankt Peterburg: Tipographia Shnora, 1808), 306.

⁴³ Translated by Alexander Levitsky and Martha Kitchen in G.R. Derzhavin, A. Levitsky, and M. Kitchen, *Poetic Works: A Bilingual Album* (Department of Slavic Studies, Brown University, 2001), 129.

⁴⁴ Derzhavin, 306.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Derzhavin, Levitsky, and Kitchen, 129.

Derzhavin. The country estate is shown to be a microcosm of the universe, and it all resides within the eye, enabled by the "cunning windows" of the devices.⁴⁶

Although this poem is significantly later than the Kuskovo print series, I refer to it since Derzhavin was a close friend of Nikolai Sheremetev (and one of the few to send a condolence letter after Praskovia Sheremeteva's death in 1803).⁴⁷ Borovikovsky's portrait of Derzhavin's wife Daria Alekseevna, painted in 1813, shows her posing across the river from Zvanka (figure 3.12). Borovikovsky alludes to some of the same viewing pleasures that Derzhavin had described in "Life at Zvanka" a few years earlier. Miniscule serf women congregate by the riverbanks, scrubbing at laundry and oblivious of the viewer's gaze (figure 3.13). The land is lush but orderly, the linear grasses and ripples of water as neat and regular as Derzhavina's lace hem. These are the mundane sights that led, in Derzhavin's poem at least, to a more ontological understanding of vision and existence when seen through "optic glass." In this painting, something similar is achieved.

Derzhavina's expansive gesture may convey her dominance in a social sense; after all, she is clad in intricately worked cashmere and lace, clutching a pet lap-dog while, across the river, serf women kneel in the mud. But Borovikovsky equates her ownership of land and serfs with increased powers of discernment.⁴⁸ Every feature of the manicured riverbank is

⁴⁶ Tatiana Smoliarova sees the viewing devices (and the signs of industry elsewhere in the poem) as a metaphor "for the poet's overwhelming feeling that the world has become irreparably fragmented." Tatiana Smoliarova, "The Promise of a Ruin: Gavrila Derzhavin's Archaic Modernity," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. J. Hell and A. Schonle (Duke University Press Books, 2010), 388.

⁴⁷ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4814, list 21. Nikolai Argunov also painted his portrait in 1800-1801.

⁴⁸ The estate was legally owned by Derzhavina (née Diakova), not her husband. See Smoliarova, 380.

visible, from the narrow grasses to individual oak leaves. Although Zvanka is slightly hazy across the Volkhov, it also is painted in incredible detail. Derzhavina shows us not just her property but her way of perceiving it, a preternatural understanding of its smallest corners and the people who lived there.

For their Kuskovo project, the Sheremetevs chose a minute and detailed view of their gardens combined with the geometric and aerial omniscience of the "prospect," a visual idiom borrowed directly from urban St. Petersburg. This strategy for depicting garden space contradicts prevailing trends about sightlines and gardens. Russian gardens were cut off from surrounding areas in ways that were more extreme than their European counterparts. Priscilla Roosevelt cites the earthen ramparts (валы) that usually surrounded Russian estates, maintaining that they served as physical and psychological barriers, making the gardens within fortified from the outside world.⁴⁹ Bolotov hated the idea of seeing all of a garden at the same time; he thought, as Schönle points out, that a garden should be like a picture gallery or "a collection of discrete vistas" to be enjoyed one by one.⁵⁰ This notion of garden spectatorship is borne out by Bolotov's watercolors, which focus on particular garden features and the delighted reactions of visitors.⁵¹ Unlike

⁴⁹ Roosevelt, 98.

⁵⁰ Schönle, 123. Thomas Newlin sees in this view a fear of crumbling social order. Bolotov feared "the muzhik in the bushes" — the lurking specter of serf labor within the walled garden — and "displayed an almost agoraphobic preoccupation with spatial boundaries ... [H]e equated the obliteration of certain physical barriers on the estate (especially the garden wall) with a potentially catastrophic breakdown of the social, political, and even ontological order of his universe." Newlin (2008), 114-115.

⁵¹ Newlin links the optical illusions of Bolotov's garden album, which contained moving parts and flaps, with his impulse toward ludic engagement with the garden itself. Newlin (2001), 71.

the Makhaev engravings, they are anecdotal, unsystematic, and limited in scale and scope, as well as being unconcerned with the technicalities of perspective, either linear or aerial. The Sheremetevs chose a different mode of representation that reflected their interest in their real and human property. Ambitiously broad, it was an attempt to represent, at least in the two initial views, every possible nook and cranny of the Kuskovo gardens. The result is not dissimilar from the urban views of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — with wide spaces suddenly (and in this case, artificially) opened up, new ways of seeing space and people were possible.⁵²

The Makhaev and Laurent prints of Kuskovo also provide a meticulously detailed view of the gardens, from the embroidered headdresses of the Russian visitors to the tiny birds in the aviary (figure 3.13). While not necessarily accurate, these minute details provided the Sheremetevs with a seemingly omniscient view of their gardens and visitors. These gardens were not merely owned and looked at by the Sheremetevs, they were also managed by a corps of serf administrators overseen by the Sheremetev men, who seemed to have been very interested in the details, both mundane and serious, of how their estates and holdings were managed. Alexander Etkind points out that Bolotov used the same word "камора" (kamora) to refer both to his camera obscura and to the highly organized system of administration he learned in Germany and applied to his estates. Etkind even quotes Bolotov complaining about the drudgery of administrative paperwork ("I had to sit

⁵² Russian flânerie would be most evocatively expressed in the 1830s by Pushkin, who described the vastness of St. Petersburg ("huge harmonious palaces and towers, crowd on the bustling banks, ships in their throngs") and the more intimate pleasures to be seen in the urban environment ("Girls' faces brighter than roses ... the hiss of foaming goblets and the pale-blue flame of punch"). Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin (trans. D. M. Thomas), "The Bronze Horseman," (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), 248.

entirely solitary in a huge and dark camera ... and to sit not near the windows but at a distance away from them ... like a bird in a cage"), equating the spatial and conceptual act of administration and using the highly suggestive "kamora."⁵³ Bolotov, stifled by indoor drudgery, favored optically playful gardens, with trompe-l'oeil features and more elaborate trickery that deliberately confused and fooled his guests. Not every visitor was pleased by this sort of prank. Newlin quotes the reaction of Count Tolstoy when confronted with an echo chamber — "Фу, пропасть!" (Ugh, abyss!) — and terms it "a queasy intimation of empirical reality as a black hole."⁵⁴ In contrast, the Sheremetevs, who reveled in administration, chose a more expansive way of representing their gardens, showing nearly everything at once. Vast spaces were made knowable (and less than horrifying) when they were precisely mapped and compressed.

The rational and orderly organization of the Makhaev and Laurent prints visually reflect the Sheremetevs' dominance and ownership, and speak to their impulse toward engaged — one could say intrusive — administration, record-keeping, and investigation. The family catalogued their correspondence obsessively, even instructing little Annushka Kalmykova to give a letter from her adoptive grandmother to the household archivist when she was finished reading it.⁵⁵ Meticulous inventories were kept of personal possessions, purchases, and expenditures. The Sheremetevs also seemed to relish

⁵³ A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Wiley, 2013), 187.

⁵⁴ Newlin (2001), 119. Tolstoy at first thought that a serf was hiding in the folly, mimicking his voice, but realized this was not the case when he tried speaking French to the echo wall and heard his own satisfactory pronunciation echoed back to him.

⁵⁵ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4733, l. 3.

meddling in the affairs of their serfs, as surviving paperwork indicates.⁵⁶ The family wanted to be kept up to date, when they were not actively ordering monetary rewards or fines, corporal punishment, travel arrangements, and many other categories of reports. Even after manumission or separation from the family, serfs were subject to the Sheremetevs' intrusions. For example, Dmitri Sheremetev ordered Nikolai Argunov to return a painting of Nikolai Sheremetev long after he was freed, and Nikolai Sheremetev, having sent Ivan Argunov's daughter to a convent after Argunov's death, was to be kept informed about her sisters' future plans.⁵⁷ The Sheremetevs commissioned operas about their own serfs, forcing serf actors to rehearse for hours to play pastoralized versions of themselves. These were staged in the green theater, where fictive serf shepherdesses performed a few yards away from fictive foreign architecture. The garden prints, offering a distorted, idealized, and inflated vision of garden sociability, served to satisfy the Sheremetevs' voyeuristic interest in their "souls."

Despite Makhaev's broad vistas, the actual gardens at Kuskovo provided a more intimate form of visual enjoyment. From nowhere on the estate can a person get a sense of limitless geometry. Sightlines are quite short and linear elements of the garden often converge not on the horizon but nearby, at a site of visual interest such as an obelisk. Although Kuskovo was sometimes referred to as "the Russian Versailles," the closest

⁵⁶ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 104, which contains Kuskovo paperwork from the 1760s, contains Pyotr Sheremetev's instructions about marriages, punishments, and other mundane events in the serf household.

⁵⁷ As was sometimes the case with Sheremetev interference, there were benevolent overtones to this request. Sheremetev wanted to be kept apprised of Yelena's status and that of her sisters so he could arrange for them to go to the convent as well if they did not marry. Marfa Argunova, assisted by Nikolai Argunov, wrote an effusive letter thanking Sheremetev for arranging this fate for her child. RGIA Fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1584, l. 6.

effect to Le Nôtre is the view from the main palace looking north toward the orangerie: a tidy section of parterres to be sure, but a vista that is interrupted by a column memorializing one of Catherine's visits to the estate and by the orangerie, about one thousand feet away. Makhaev had to invent his sweeping perspectives, or least compile them from fragmented views.⁵⁸ And although Makhaev did not include any optical illusions like the ones adored by Bolotov, and indeed the architecture of the park ensemble did not emphasize this kind of play, the Sheremetevs did enjoy some elements of visual trickery. The family had a variety of wooden shams (обманки) that would have been used to startle visitors. Some represented fancifully foreign figures, and would likely have been displayed in the Dutch house. But a few surviving panels show serfs, including a girl with a melon. Unlike Bolotov, the Sheremetevs weren't interested in dousing their guests with water or fooling them with mirrors, but they did seem to recognize that the strangest and most startling sight of all would be to come face to face with a painted peasant, its eyes gazing relentlessly back without sight.

III. Ostankino

⁵⁸ Jonathan Crary writes of Venice, " a city that is knowable only as the accumulation of multiple and diverse points of view ... Whether it is a question of the stage, urban design, or visual imagery, the intelligibility of a site depends on a precisely specified relation between a delimited point of view and a tableau. The camera obscura, with its monocular aperture, became a more perfect terminus for a cone of vision, a more perfect incarnation of a single point than the awkward binocular body of the human subject. The camera, in a sense, was a metaphor for the most rational possibilities of a perceiver within the increasingly dynamic disorder of the world." Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 52-53.

Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetev died in 1788, at a moment when his heir Nikolai Petrovich was already deeply involved in theatrical activities and his relationship with Praskovia Kovaleva. Nikolai Sheremetev had traveled in Europe on a grand tour and was tired of Kuskovo, which was already several decades old.⁵⁹ He conceived of a new estate, Ostankino, on land north of Moscow that had once belonged to his mother's family, the Cherkasskys.⁶⁰ The new house was intended to be a modern "palace of arts" equipped with the latest theatrical innovations; the edifice was built around a core stage, visible from the main staircase and picture gallery. Over the course of the 1790s, the Ostankino usadba was built at tremendous expense but by the time it was complete in 1798, Kovaleva was almost too ill to sing. After her retirement and marriage, not to mention her death in 1803 and Sheremetev's in 1809, the house never hosted the full range of spectacles it was designed for. Nevertheless, the completed palace and its gardens provide insight into an interesting moment for the Sheremetev family during a moment of personal crisis, and into changing approaches to art, architecture, and serfdom.

Besides the emphasis on a functional and advanced theater, Ostankino's most dramatic change from Kuskovo involved a conceptual move inwards. Sheremetev abandoned the extravagant garden pavilions of the older grounds, save for a few classical structures. Instead, Ostankino featured large parade halls with the kind of themes once

⁵⁹ Nikolai Sheremetev apparently did not keep a journal of his trip but the tour was recorded by his travel companion in F. A. Kurakin, *Arkhiv knyazya F. A. Kurakina* ed. V. N. Smolyaninov (1894).

⁶⁰ E. N. Gritsak, *Kuskovo i Ostankino*, Pamiatniki vseirnogo nasledia (Moskva: Veche, 2004). The palace was designed by a large number of local and foreign architects, including Starov, Mironov, Quarenghi, and Pavel Argunov. For a full account of the planning and construction, see Nadezhda Alekseevna Yelizarova, *Ostankino* (1966), 17-26.

reserved for garden structures. Stone pharaohs flank the doors of the Blue Hall; the Italian pavilion's walls are covered in painted grotesques. These allusions to foreign cultures are more thematically more subtle than Kuskovo's garden pavilions, but the interiors on the whole are much more ornate than its predecessors. The Ostankino palace is almost entirely in "parade" mode, from the mirrored enfilade near the upstairs bedroom to the lavishly decorated halls downstairs.⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, it was not a very comfortable place to live in, and Nikolai Sheremetev, along with Praskovia Kovaleva and their clique of elite serf actresses, lived in the "Old House," a small building dating from the Cherkassky era near Ostankino's small church.⁶² The house contained relatively simple furnishings and decorations, and provided dining and office space as well as bedrooms. An Ivan Argunov self-portrait was displayed in the hallway along with other paintings of his former friends and associates, including the Khripunovs.⁶³ In contrast, the main palace displayed two large-scale works by Nikolai Argunov (a portrait of Tsar Paul and a copy of Angelica Kauffman's Achilles), the Sheremetevs' collection of Old Master paintings, and Western European prints in the specially designated "Print Gallery."

Optical illusions and visual play also moved indoors. Ostankino's walls are covered with a variety of media and materials, melding trompe l'oeil representations of architectural decoration with actual reliefs (which themselves are sometimes genuine, and

⁶¹ Kuskovo, by way of contrast, featured a parade bedroom and a much more comfortable room nearby with a niche bed. There were other more homey bedrooms upstairs.

⁶² Nadezhda Alekseevna Yelizarova, *Ostankino, Po muzeiam i vystavkam Moskvy i podmoskovia* (Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1955), 10, and Smith, 131-132, and 146-147.

⁶³ N. G. Presnova, *Argunovy, Krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*, ed. N. G. Presnova (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2005), 32-34.

sometimes constructed with wood or papier-mâché to mimic other materials). This mixing of expensive and inexpensive elements allowed the Sheremetevs to save some money without compromising when it came to complicated decorations that covered all available wall space. The most sophisticated trickery, however, was in the theater. Machines designed by Priakhin, who may have mined the Sheremetevs' library for inspiration, mimicked rain and thunder, allowed actors to descend from the ceiling, and even converted the space from stage to ballroom.⁶⁴

There are few representations of Ostankino's gardens from this period. During Nikolai Sheremetev's Ostankino years, his most involved visual project concerning his family terrain was the Атласъ Дачамъ ("Atlas Dacham," or "Atlas of Allotments"), a book of maps that showed Sheremetev land (figure 2).⁶⁵ Overseen by the surveyor Ippolit Novikov and illustrated by Sheremetev serfs, the Atlas project consisted of thirty-seven maps, one for each of the family's вотчины, or baronial holdings, and a title page with heraldic emblems. The Atlas provides a visual summary of the Sheremetevs' vast properties while condensing, glossing, and aestheticizing them. The result is a collision of elite and common modes of seeing and understanding landscape, a large-scale project designed with one primary viewer in mind.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Yelizarova (1944), 89-96.

⁶⁵ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 888. Nikolai Argunov's participation in the Atlas project is discussed in Rakina (2004), 71-72, and Presnova, 153.

⁶⁶ The Atlas' information is a major source for several scholarly books about the Sheremetevs, including K. N. Shchepetov, *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885*, Trudy Ostankinskogo Dvortsa-Muzeia (Moskva: Izd. Dvortsa-muzeia, 1947) and E. N. Bobrov, *Sheremetevy i Ivanovo: yubileinii sbornik statei po materialam Sheremetevskykh chtenii 1991-2001* (Ivanono: Konsultant, 2001).

Writing of Russian maps during the Muscovite period, Valerie Kivelson draws attention to the oversized houses of serfs and constant intrusion of serfs' names — and sometimes signatures — onto seventeenth-century maps. Kivelson contrasts this practice with the near invisibility of chattel slaves and indentured servants on Western European maps. "Russian mapmakers painted a world in which peasants participated in the social order as taxpayers, as witnesses, as active litigants," she writes; serfs were integrated into the landscape in ways that acknowledged their social existence.⁶⁷ Over the intervening century, Petrine reforms changed map-making conventions, fomenting a new interest in the scientific and objective.⁶⁸ In this context, it is not surprising that the Atlas does not feature the exaggerated huts and names of its Muscovite predecessors. Instead, serf outposts are condensed into geometric shapes devoid of family names or recognizable contours. On the Ostankino map, for example, the Sheremetevs' palace sprawls out, its many wings identifiable (figure 3.14). The gardens radiate northward as French-style parterres give way to an English ramble. Due south, the settlement at Marina (слобода Марьина) is depicted as two even lines of houses bordered by regular rectangles of green (figure 3.15). If this green space contained kitchen gardens, livestock, or outbuildings, the map does not depict them. In fact, it is impossible to tell from the map even the

⁶⁷ V.A. Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and Its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 95.

⁶⁸ Willard Sunderland calls this phenomenon "high territoriality" and links an aesthetic "esprit geometrique" with Petrine interest in using maps for the purpose of governance and administration. J. Burbank, M. Von Hagen, and A.V. Remnev, *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930* (Indiana University Press, 2007), 45.

approximate number of people who might have lived at Marina at this time, let alone their names or other demographic information.⁶⁹

The names that the Atlas features are nearly all noble. The Sheremetev plots may be floating like islands, detached from the rest of Russia's topography, but they are not borderless. Instead, Roman letters divide the perimeters of each area into segments. A large portion of each page — almost an entire leaf in the case of the Kuskovo map — is then dedicated to "описание смежных земель" ("description of neighboring lands"). These lists are a who's who of elite Russia: Golistsyns, Razumovskys, Yusupovs, Volkonskys, and others, alongside land owned by the church or state. The features of these plots are completely ignored in the Atlas and the only signs of public or urban spaces are the few roads (for example, the "road from Moscow to the city of Pereslavl" carefully labeled on the Ostankino map). While maps do contain both natural and man-made features, the project as a whole renounces the traditional task of an atlas: the comprehensive representation of vast tracts of land, divided into pages but connected nonetheless.

The Atlas Dacham, instead of universality, represents two ways of seeing and representing. On one hand, there is scientific surveying, measurements that provide remarkably precise information: land is divided into categories (arable, forest, marsh, etc.) and is measured out in desyatins (2.7 acre units) and sazhen (equivalent to about seven feet). Visually, the draughtsmen also emphasized precision, penning tiny trees and bushes and carefully delineated borders not only between the Sheremetevs' plots and

⁶⁹ There is population information on other pages, such as the Kuskovo leaves.

other territory, but within the votchiny whenever the character of the land changed.⁷⁰ This rational and practical approach to describing geography, however, collides with the Atlas's equal emphasis on the decorative and anecdotal. Meticulous page borders, painted in watercolor and adorned with vines, ribbons, and carefully rendered pseudo-giltwood element, contrast with the linear borders within the maps.⁷¹ Text, including descriptions of the property, keys, and scales, are surrounded by fanciful watercolors that insert generic pastoral elements into the highly specific topographical schema; for example, a traveler rests on a bank near the key to the Kolomenskoe map while a goat peeks over the scale marker. On the Ostankino pages, the trees marked on the map appear near decorative trees, the pen and watercolor plants closely juxtaposed but formally and conceptually very different (figure 3.16). One symbolizes real terrain, if not an actual tree at that location, while the other comes from the imagination of its illustrator. The watercolor makes it immediately apparent that the Atlas has not been printed; this is a single book, the only one of its kind. But the non-map elements also reveal the inventive powers of the anonymous serf illustrator, as well as his perception of the project itself.

The Ostankino pages, which are the first map in the Atlas, feature a strange encounter that exemplifies much of the project's contradictions (figure 3.17).⁷² Surveyors,

⁷⁰ On the Ostankino map for example, marshlands are not just shaded differently but bordered by light green lines, and lowlands surrounding the river are also delineated. Arable land is marked by slender lines that mimic plowed earth.

⁷¹ The Atlas featured watercolors during a transitional moment for the medium, between its older application in maps and plans and newer interest in portable paints for travelers, women, amateurs, etc. For a discussion of this transition in the British context, see Michael Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect: A Social History of English Watercolours*, Colonnade Book (London: British Museum Publications, 1981).

⁷² RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 888, ll. 4ob-5.

dressed in culottes and Western European clothing, gather around a surveying compass on a tripod. They are setting up a measurement and one surveyor rushes away, presumably to set up a marker elsewhere. The process of measuring is shown to be attenuated and also opaque; it is unclear how this moment of activity will be translated into legible form. Even the document held by one of the surveyors cannot be read since the text is merely thin lines of watercolor wash. Meanwhile, a group of serfs gathers nearby. A peasant cottage is visible to the right but it is not geographically specific, merely a marker to show the countryside where the scene takes the place (and it jars with the rocaille border of the legend above). The serfs, all men with impressive beards and old-fashioned tunics, are the social opposites of the surveyors. They are even drawn differently, with thin, dark lines of gouache outlining their cloth boots and, to a certain extent, their facial expressions (while the round-faced surveyors have cartoonish dashes of paint to mark out eyes and mouths). The serfs imitate the surveyors, planting their canes in the ground like the compass tripod and gesturing to each other with as much urgency as the well-dressed interlopers. The surveyors' way of visually reckoning with the land seems to be new to them; a bit of Enlightenment rationality has suddenly appeared in the sloboda.

This scene resembles the Makhaev engravings' interest in two ways of looking: through a glass (whether directly through a telescope or indirectly at the product of the camera obscura) or in an unmediated way that causes such delight for the various garden visitors. Once again, there is a marked class difference between ways of seeing terrain. Nikolai Sheremetev might be able to peruse the atlas and benefit from the surveyors' and

demographers' arcane research but the serfs will never have this knowledge. The knowledge that they do have — since surely as subsistence farmers they would be familiar with the marshlands and fields of their plots — is unacknowledged. If the surveyors asked them details about the population or terrain, their answers are not cited or depicted in any marginal watercolor.

The surveying was undertaken by Ippolit Novikov, who had achieved the rank of титулярный советник and was probably educated and urbane. Nikolai Argunov was paid to draw the shields on the frontispiece.⁷³ The author of the watercolor borders and vignettes is unknown, but since an outsider would probably have signed his work as Novikov did, may have been a Sheremetev serf. Despite the drawings' anonymity, a playful self-portrait of sorts can be found within the Ryazan province map, which shows a few small villages (figure 3.18). On the bottom of the page, fantastic buildings look almost Mediterranean in the distance. Above the scale marker ("Scale of the map: 500 sazhen per English inch"), a half-nude painter holds a palette and brush (figure 3.19). At his feet are measuring tools, books, and what seems to be a map showing rivers that resembles pre-Petrine cartography. The painter is working on borders and rocaille decorations similar to those on every page of the Atlas. His naked chest and the pastoral setting hint at an artistic idyll that is belied by his chubbiness, slumped posture, and the cartoonish articulation of his hands and feet. This is a self-portrait with a sense of humor, an un-ideal (and possibly enserfed) body in a fantastic landscape. The artist, moreover, has his back turned to the grotesque mountainscape, and does not refer to the maps and

⁷³ Presnova, 153, and Rakina (2004), 71-72. The frontispiece was published for the first time in Rakina's monograph.

closed books at his feet. He paints from his imagination, encircling the mundane villages of Ryazan with shells, tridents, and a hazy sea (though the closest coast is about five hundred miles from these settlements). Thus is a rare moment of wit and playfulness amidst the Sheremetevs' artistic projects and an odd illustration for an atlas; in fact, it represents the opposite of an atlas' usual goals of geographic accuracy and the invisibility of its authors.

The Atlas' title page also contains an oblique kind of portraiture in the form of heraldic emblems (figure 3.20). These were painted by Nikolai Argunov, who was ordered in 1799 to paint the Sheremetevs' "full coat of arms illuminated against armorial colors" ("полной герб его сиятельства и разлюминованной против гербовника красками").⁷⁴ Varvara Rakina observes that the result, which surpasses the official commission, is oddly archaic in effect, especially in the lions' expressive faces, and concludes that Argunov probably referred to old archival documents to inform his work.⁷⁵ This was apparently an unfamiliar medium for him, and besides, an archaizing tendency would have been familiar to Argunov and his father. But historicizing aside, this approach to what is normally a schematic and highly symbolic form of representation is surprisingly lively. Argunov has given the lions wry, almost human expressions. The bear of Yaroslavl, the rampant lion of Volodimir, the deer of Nizhnii Novgorod, and even St. George's horse on the shield of Moscow are all playfully animated. The explosion of color and the gilding are not typical for Argunov, nor is his interest in minute detail. In

⁷⁴ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1535, list 9, cited in Varvara Aleksandrovna Rakina, "Nikolai Argunov i problema zakazchika v russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi kontsa XVIII - Pervoi Chetverti XIX veka" (Gosudarstvennii institut iskusstvoznaniya, 2005), 75.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 74-75.

function, this title page is a map of a map, a symbolic summary of the geographic regions that will be represented within its pages. It's also a kind of mise en abyme, with emblems within emblems (and the effect is repeated with each map, as a different coat of arms reappears to link it to the title page and the sum of the Sheremetevs' vast holdings). Like the sounds in Bolotov's off-putting cave, the symbols of the Sheremetev family and Russian provinces echo and diminish, reminding viewers of the vastness of this terrain.

IV. Argunovs and space

The heraldry frontispiece, while it represents a departure in medium and subject matter, is actually not so different from the Argunovs' primary task, which was to create portraiture that demonstrated their fluency with Sheremetev family mores and history. Both Nikolai and Ivan Argunov were expected to make paintings that contextualized their sitters, including in fraught projects such as the Praskovia Sheremeteva cycle. The Argunovs were apparently expected to bring a certain shrewdness to their portraiture, an ability to visually explain what they presumably had observed over decades of living in the Sheremetev household. Hence Annushka Kalmykova's print with her late adoptive grandmother's face, reminding the rest of the family of Varvara Sheremeteva's acceptance of the child. The source of Varvara Sheremeteva's portrait is thoughtfully chosen, evoking her own youth and the patronage of Empress Elizabeth.⁷⁶ Likewise, Nikolai Argunov's portraits of Praskovia Sheremeteva evince a kind of close looking — at her, at the Sheremetev's social microcosm, and at other visual art — that it seems only a "household" or serf artist could be expected to master.

⁷⁶ This painting is a rare inversion of the usual copying pattern; Ivan Argunov composed the arrangement, which was later copied by Delapierre, a French painter.

This aspect of the Argunovs' professional identity is exemplified in Ivan Argunov's self-portrait (figure 0.6). Argunov paints himself in a kerchief, smiling slightly. The tools in Argunov's hands and on the table have been variously interpreted as implements for architecture or sculpture, complicating the identification of the sitter, but Tatiana Selinova convincingly maintains that they are tools for copying.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Selinova points out that the pile of instruments seems to spell out the Russian letters "И А" or even "И П А" if the rightmost arrangement is read twice.⁷⁸ These are Argunov's own initials (Иван Петрович Аргунов). While the legibility of the stack is open to interpretation, Argunov did enjoy signing his name playfully in other portraits, most notably in the painting of Annushka Kalmykova.⁷⁹ Accepting this painting as a self-portrait suggests that Argunov's understanding of his profession was strongly tied to copying, albeit in fresh or even playful ways that were integrated with the inventions of portrait painting. Both Argunovs were expected to absorb and repurpose their environment to suit the complicated desires of their patron owners.

Lotman went so far as to conflate Nikolai Argunov's vision with his master's. Writing of eighteenth-century portraiture in Russia, he singled out Argunov and the odd pregnancy portrait of 1803 (figure 0.4):

⁷⁷ T. A. Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973), 50-51.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁹ Argunov did generally sign his name in Latin with a "pinxit" and the date, but his placement of the signature on Varvara Sheremeteva's fictive print adds a playful element to his usual practice. For a full accounting of Argunov's signatures, see Selinova (195-206). His earlier works are signed Оргунов (Orgunov); it was not uncommon for Sheremetev serfs to have multiple spellings associated with their last names.

Even if the client ordered a portrait of him- or herself or family and the picture was intended to be hung in the family home, the sitter had to be shown wearing dress uniform with all medals and regalia; in other words, the viewer was presumed to be a 'stranger.' On the other hand, late in the century Count Sheremetev's serf-artist, I. P. Argunov, painted an outstanding portrait of the count's mistress and later wife, his serf Parasha Zhemchugova-Kovaleva, in her negligé and — and unheard of boldness — pregnant; the viewer had to identify him- or herself with one person only, Parasha's lover and husband.⁸⁰

Notwithstanding the confusion about authorship and date, this is an odd assertion.

Lotman overlooks the presence of Nikolai Sheremetev in the portrait in the form of the uncanny portrait bust (which, it must be noted, has exactly the same social signifiers of medals and regalia ascribed to more conventional parade portraiture). Lotman is perhaps implying that Sheremetev would be accustomed to seeing his own likeness in art. It is true that Sheremetev, like his parents, furnished his surroundings with portraits of himself juxtaposed with paintings and sculptures of others. But this does not explain the strangeness of the pregnancy portrait or indeed of the Argunovs' work in general.

Nikolai Argunov adapted both Nikolai Sheremetev's bust and Praskovia Sheremeteva's pregnant figure from other works of art: his own late 1790s painting of Sheremetev and an anonymous miniature of Sheremeteva in a striped gown.⁸¹ Both figures are dramatically changed. As discussed in the first chapter of this project, the bust seems to be an uneasy combination of sculpture and painting, its textures suspiciously soft for a bronze. Praskovia's face is painted with drier colors than the earlier miniature and harsher shading and, of course, her pregnant abdomen is a new addition that serves to legitimate Dmitri Sheremetev, about a year old when the portrait was complete. These

⁸⁰ Y.M. Lotman and A. Shukman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (I.B. Tauris, 2001), 66.

⁸¹ Varvara Rakina, *Zhivopisets Nikolai Argunov* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2004), 83-87.

references to other imagery and the self-consciously artificial space of the portrait, with its chaotic linear elements veering in unlikely directions, call attention to the painting as a site of allusion. The subject matter might be as private and personal as Lotman describes, but the portrait's facture resists intimacy. If we as viewers identify with Nikolai Sheremetev, we see with him not his wife but a picture of his wife, or indeed a picture of a picture.

Lotman mentions portraiture in the context of poetry's shift from formal and elevated modes of address to a more casual form of appeal to readers. Lotman proposes that intimacy can be engendered not only with familiar forms of address but by invoking a shared point of reference; his primary example is a Pushkin fragment called "Women" that mentions an unpublished poem by Anton Delvig, his lyceum classmate.⁸² Pushkin's allusion divides his readers in two: "an extremely small group that could understand the text thanks to their detailed familiarity with extra-textual experiences shared with its author; and the great mass of readers who sense that something is being alluded to but cannot decipher what it is."⁸³ The Praskovia cycle and the pregnancy portrait in particular also rely on references that only Nikolai Sheremetev, and perhaps a few of his closest circle, could comprehend. Like the Pushkin fragment, they conspicuously borrow from other sources, but these sources (the miniature and Argunov's own portrait especially) were even more obscure, artwork confined to the Sheremetev household just as the portrait cycle was intended for the most private spaces of the palace.

⁸² Lotman and Shukman, 66.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

This invocation of shared visual reference points is itself a kind of visual surrogacy, although in this case more fraught than Lotman's Pushkin example. Pushkin was making what was essentially an in-joke to friends; Argunov was the property of Sheremetev who was apparently expected, as part of his servitude, to make sense of a jarringly diverse visual environment. Despite the success of the portrait cycle, for which Argunov was very well paid, there is some evidence that they were perceived differently from other, more conventional portraits. The coffin painting (figure 0.5) was placed in a cover that was only opened and viewed on important religious holidays. A Sheremetev child of the nineteenth century later recalled a room with "an image of Praskovia Ivanovna in her coffin ... one in a cap with a miniature on her breast, the other, her last portrait, just before giving birth, in the striped dress, with that bittersweet look on her mouth ... [a few times a year] the children were led past [them]. Those of the younger generation who made mischief lost this honor, and usually 'the little sinner' wept bitterly."⁸⁴ The need to cover the coffin painting, its sad subject aside, shows how powerful an object it must have been and suggests a relationship to icons, also covered with metal carapaces.⁸⁵ Argunov had painted something too terrible to look at, even decades after Sheremeteva's death when viewers of the painting were generations too young to have known her. What Rakina calls a "vacuum" around the coffin, the expanse of solid black that defies rational conventions of space and sight, unmoors the dead

⁸⁴ Sergei Sheremetev et al., *Memuary grafa S.D. Sheremeteva* (Moskva: Izd-vo "INDRIK", 2001) cited in Douglas Smith, *The Pearl : A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 282.

⁸⁵ Inventories from Nikolai Sheremetev's lifetime mention icons in nearly every room; the icons are usually named in the inventories, even when easel paintings are not, and are listed first in the list of each room's contents. See RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 194.

woman from historical time and places her in another kind of abyss — not the repeated echoes that disturbed Tolstoy in Bolotov's garden, but true emptiness.⁸⁶

The Argunovs' paintings, while inconsistent in style, uniformly reject the logical constraints of perspective and indeed any depiction of "rational" or "real" space. The closest they approached to painting a person in a recognizable architectural context was in Nikolai Argunov's portrait of Ivan Yakimov, which shows the child on stage surrounded by painted scenery — the most artificial space of lived experience (figure 2.6). Other backgrounds are copied from earlier paintings or allude only glancingly to monochromatic walls or un-showy chair-backs to situate them. Again, it is the outlier Praskovia cycle that provides the most insight about the priorities of serf portraiture in this context. Argunov, who probably knew about Sheremetev's idea that his marriage was comparable to Peter's (or knew, at the very least, the importance of early eighteenth-century portraiture in this particular household), painted not only the subject of the portrait but Petrine space around her, placing her in an archaic and reverential context that equated her to the legitimate ancestors of the Sheremetevs' portrait gallery.

The Sheremetevs used both garden projects to exploit not only the labor of their serfs but also their vision, using them to operate camerae obscurae, collect geographic data, and fill in the borders with whimsical vignettes of their own invention. The results are expansive views of terrain and its human inhabitants, giving the Sheremetevs a way to perceive huge amounts of space and information by looking closely at the printed or drawn pages. Anonymously, serfs worked in concert to produce these projects and

⁸⁶ Rakina (2005), 95. As Rakina describes, the uncharacteristic passage of black pigment has caused doubts about the attribution; Presnova and Lomize, who examined the painting technically, believe it might be the work of Yakov Argunov. Ibid.

generally subsumed their own subjective perception of the space around them into a collaborative and synthesized end result. With the Argunovs, particularly Nikolai, the perception of serfs proved to be much stranger and more dangerous. The Sheremetevs had power over the Argunovs but allowed them to paint, albeit within certain constraints, in original ways. The portraits father and son produced were objects of pride for the Sheremetevs, who were happy to have such talented portraitists in their possession. But Nikolai Argunov's cycle of the serf/countess Praskovia Sheremeteva showed what happened when a painter looked too closely at the household around him. At least one of these paintings had to be covered and hidden away for generations to come. Confined to an oppressive household, discouraged from painting landscapes and interiors, Nikolai Argunov painted other paintings — and revealed that portraiture was not necessarily the likeness of a living person but a ghostly jumble of social markers and formal citations.

Chapter 4: The Fight in Kitai Gorod: Collecting, Ownership, and Enlightenment

I. Introduction

In 1770, Dmitri Levitsky painted a portrait of Nikifor Artemovich Sezemov, one of the Sheremetevs' wealthiest serfs (figure 4.1). Sezemov ran businesses in Vykhino and was successful enough that, like several other Sheremetev serf industrialists, he was able to own serfs of his own. Although this was not legal, the Sheremetevs knew about and in fact enabled the practice by registering their serfs' serfs in the Sheremetev name. In return, the Sheremetevs gouged Sezemov for money in the form of large "gifts" or loans.¹ Sezemov was wealthy enough to donate more than 30,000 rubles to the Moscow Orphanage over the course of several years and had his portrait painted by Levitsky as a patron of the institution.² Levitsky's painting upends the conventions of representing human property: not only is Sezemov depicted fully independent of his masters, he is the subject rather than the object of charity as he holds in his hands an engraving of a foundling. Furthermore, he does not assume an aristocratic veneer as the Sheremetevs' actresses did in their own portraits. Sezemov was so rich that he did not need to mask his social identity. His dingy caftan and a beard mark him as exempt from the Petrine

¹ K. N. Shchepetov, *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885*, Trudy Ostantinskogo dvortsa-muzeia (Moskva: Izd. Dvortsa-muzeia, 1947), 109. For more on the phenomenon of capitalist serfs, see also *Iz zhizni krepostnykh krestian Rossii XVIII-XIX vekov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvenoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatelstvo ministerstva prosvescheniya RSFSR, 1963), 21-26.

² N. G. Presnova, *Portretnoe sobranie grafov Sheremetevykh v usadbe Kuskovo: albom-katalog* (Moskva: Minuvshee, 2002), 118.

modernizing project.³ Levitsky painted another Orphanage patron, Prokofi Demidov, in a silk dressing gown and culottes, literally and metaphorically cultivating his garden with the Orphanage dome hazily visible in the background (figure 4.2). Next to this allegory of patronage and Enlightenment, Sezemov appears to stand in darkness. But despite the absence of modern trappings, he reveals himself to be an independent man of action (at least in this context) despite his status as a serf.

Levitsky's painting reveals the complicated state of property within the Sheremetev empire and also how important ownership was, both to master and to serf. The Sheremetevs were apparently happy to assist Sezemov, since they benefitted materially from his good fortune. For Sezemov, serf ownership gave him a power that he lacked in his relationship with the Sheremetev family; his workers complained of exploitation and cruel treatment.⁴ But it was his sheer wealth, the result of industry and trade that allowed him an identity outside the Sheremetev hierarchy and exempted him from the social obsequiousness that was expected of administrators, artists, and other householders. At the same time, his wealth was constantly threatened by the Sheremetevs' tendency toward extortion. Because he was still their serf, they were able to exert immense power over him. The more money a serf acquired, the more expensive it would become for him to maintain his position or buy his freedom.⁵ Sezemov and other

³ Peter's original decree required that "leading merchants" shave as well as nobles. See discussion in Elise Kimmerling Wirtschafter, *Russia's Age of Serfdom 1649-1861* (Blackwell Pub., 2008), 45 and 71.

⁴ Shchepetov, *Krepostnoe pravo v votchinakh Sheremetevykh, 1708-1885*, 106.

⁵ Jerome Blum uses Nikolai Sheremetev as an example of a nobleman who gouged his serfs for money (and also extorted them by having them pay exorbitantly for surrogates to join the military in their place). Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia, from the*

serf industrialists became adept at hiding assets from their owners while simultaneously paying bribes to them.⁶

Sezemov's portrait embodies some of the tensions of "elite" serfdom that troubled both serfs and their owners. Levitsky highlights the wealth and relative independence of his sitter but does not include any hints about where his money might be coming from or the complicated power structure he simultaneously manipulated and was constrained by. Levitsky paints a man of power and action who did not feel the need to acknowledge loyalty to others in this context. On the other hand, Sezemov was not in a position to construct a social persona for himself the way the Sheremetevs' inner circle did; his clout lay purely in his ability to generate cash to be appropriated by the Sheremetevs or secretly diverted to avoid detection. This is a portrait of shadowy capitalistic enterprise within a feudal context, of a tremendously rich person who was forbidden from owning property, not to mention of a man who was simultaneously a serf and a serf-owner.

For the star actresses, the Argunovs, and other serfs who were subject to the Sheremetevs' direct supervision, mere money did not suffice to move them upwards through Russia's social hierarchy towards freedom. Owning art and certain significant objects, on the other hand, conveyed messages about dignity and status that wealth alone could not buy. The difference between currency and objects for Sheremetev serfs was conspicuously demonstrated by Catherine the Great, who attended a performance of Grétry's *Mariages Samnites* at Kuskovo in 1787. As Douglas Smith recounts, Catherine

Ninth to the Nineteenth century (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 425-426 and 472-473.

⁶ Blum observes that this bribery was necessary because the Sheremetevs habitually overspent. Blum, 379.

rewarded Tatiana Shlykova with gold coins but was so moved by Praskovia Kovaleva's performance that, after a day of contemplation, she gave her one of her diamond rings instead.⁷ The ring could not only be possessed, it could be worn: shown off conspicuously as an emblem of the Empress's approval.⁸ To a certain extent, elite serfs with collections were emulating the behavior of the Sheremetevs, who also understood the social power of ownership and display. As discussed throughout this dissertation, much of the art that they commissioned reflected a desire to portray themselves advantageously: as politically powerful aristocrats, as benevolent serf owners, and as participants in Enlightenment culture. Art and objects that they bought served a similar purpose. The Sheremetevs' collections represent an attempt to understand the natural and political intricacies of the wider world and to assert their own place within it.

This chapter will examine ownership and collecting among both the Sheremetevs and their elite serfs. Focusing on a few discrete episodes with surviving documentation, I will examine how nobles and serfs both owned and displayed Enlightenment artifacts. The Sheremetevs were fashionable collectors, up to date but rarely innovative as they gathered vast assemblages of natural specimens, armor, books, instruments, paintings, furniture, jewels, and other categories of commodities. Nevertheless, their collections reveal an engagement with the ideas and possibilities of Enlightenment collecting. They understood how expressions of personal identity could be married to attempts to rationalize the broader world. Furthermore, they realized at some level that their

⁷ Douglas Smith, *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 82-84.

⁸ It is possible that this is the diamond ring in Nikolai Argunov's 1803-1804 "bridal" portrait of Praskovia Sheremeteva.

ownership of people mirrored (as well as enabled) their ownership of objects. This chapter will examine how the Sheremetevs envisioned serfdom, their powers, and their responsibilities.

The stakes were even higher for serfs who collected art. The top actresses and the Argunovs all possessed property that helped define their identity during servitude and in some cases may have helped them escape it. While serfs' belongings were not inventoried with the same care that the Sheremetevs' houses were, some records survive about important examples. This evidence is sparse but it does provide insight about an overlooked phenomenon. When people who were themselves owned invested money, care, and time into their own possessions, this represented not just an emulation of their owners' behavior but also a reversal of the conditions of their servitude. Elite Sheremetev serfs were required to produce art for others, sometimes against their will, and they had little or no power to negotiate what they did and how much they were paid. Collecting demonstrated that they were consumers as well as producers of art, an important distinction for people who were owned and controlled by their patrons.

II. The Sheremetev Family's Collections

The Sheremetev family's collections consisted of familiar categories: paintings, prints, books, natural specimens both animal and mineral, scientific instruments, jewelry and gems. Like was often displayed with like. Although there were portraits virtually everywhere in the Sheremetev palaces, a Portrait Gallery at Kuskovo housed the most encyclopedic range of likenesses. The Print Gallery at Ostankino displayed Western European prints, the *kunstkammer* in St. Petersburg a range of mineral and animal

specimens.⁹ An armor collection could be found at Kuskovo, which also was home to garden pavilions that had thematic collections of their own: Dutch furniture in the Dutch House, antiquities in the Italian pavilion, shells in the Grotto, etc. If the parameters of these collections were not particularly original, they represented the degree to which the Sheremetevs were fluent in the norms of eighteenth-century elites, both abroad and in Russia. The family owned the art and scientific objects necessary to show their engagement with Enlightenment trends.¹⁰

Many of the collections did, however, involve a personal or local element alongside imported or exotic goods. As Anne Higonnet has observed, private collections present an opportunity for a collector to portray himself or herself in oblique ways, "to stage a self" through direct self-portraiture or indirect visual cues.¹¹ This was most clearly visible in the Portrait Gallery, which displayed paintings of the Sheremetevs within a grid of illustrious personages, from Fyodor II to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. The mineral collection housed in the family's *kunstkammer* included portraits of Boris Sheremetev and Peter the Great along with specimens from distant lands such as coral

⁹ MMUO opis estampnaya gallereya 1809 and RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1294.

¹⁰ The collection even included a wax anatomical figure, very similar to the one at La Specola, with real hair and removable organs. E. Y. Grigorieva, "Voskovaya Venera iz sobraniia N. P. Sheremeteva," in *Dvorets, usadba, zapovednik: materialy nauchnoi konferentsii, posvyaschennoi 90-letiu organizatsii Moskovskogo muzeia-usadby Ostankino*, ed. Varvara Rakina (Moskva: ITRK 2010).

¹¹ Anne Higonnet, "Self-Portrait as a Museum," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (2007), 199. Also: *A Museum of One's Own: Private Collecting, Public Gift*, 1st ed. (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope Pub., 2008), 122-167.

and an ostrich egg, evoking the Petrine moment and the family's role within it.¹² The library contained thousands of books, including iconic Western European works such as the *Encyclopédie* but also Russian texts and books that touched on family history, including that of Boris Sheremetev.¹³ The "Armor Room" contained "231 and a half" rifles, shotguns, and pistol pairs (the half signifying a set with a missing pistol) and more than 150 swords, sabers, spears, and the like.¹⁴ The sabers came from China but the rest were European, many signed by manufacturers in England, France, Italy, and Spain. In case it wasn't obvious that the collection alluded to the Western European military exploits of Feldmarshal Boris Petrovich Sheremetev, his portrait was the only painting in the room and linked the martial holdings of the family to their most important ancestor.¹⁵

The Sheremetevs' Western European art collections were for the most part unremarkable compared to the Raphaels and Rembrandts accumulated by their contemporaries.¹⁶ Their collections, however, were vast. Natalia Presnova has cataloged

¹² Dmitrii Nikolaevich Sheremetev, *Opis biblioteki, nakhodiashcheisia v Moskve, na Vozdvizhenkie, v dome grafa Dmitriia Nikolaevicha Sheremeteva, do 1812 g.* (Sanktpeterburg: Tip. M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1883), 579. The collection also contained "dirt from Malta," possibly a souvenir from the Feldmarshal's time there (575).

¹³ *Ibid.* 3, 4, 56. See also T. Kovaleva, *Biblioteka Sheremetevykh v sobranii redkikh knig gosudarstvennogo muzeia keramiki i "Usadba Kuskovo XVIII veka"* (Moscow: Vneshtorgizdat, 2000).

¹⁴ RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, list 64.

¹⁶ See K. V. Malinovsky, *Istoriya kollektionirovanniya zhivopisi v Sankt-Peterburge v XVIII veke* (Sankt-Peterburg: Kriga, 2012), 313-321. Oleg Neverov observes that despite the Sheremetevs' extensive (and not terribly noteworthy) collection of foreign portraits, "it was to the Argunovs, a dynasty of local artists who were his serfs on the Kuskovo estate, that Count Piotr turned for the portraits of his contemporaries and ancestors." O.

hundreds of portraits from the family's holdings that still survive, and archives reveal others (such as another Ivan Argunov self-portrait) that are now lost. Inventories of Ostankino in 1809, the year of Nikolai Sheremetev's death, record more than 250 paintings, including landscapes and mythological scenes, in that palace alone.¹⁷ The family's library was equally huge, with thousands of volumes from Adam Olearius' Russian travel accounts to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, from a "complete" Diderot in seventeen volumes to *L'encyclopédie perruquière*, from *La Gazette noire par un homme qui n'est pas blanc* to an English volume on Pugachev, from Winckelmann to a book entitled *Vie voluptueuse entre les capucins et les nonnes* (with illustrations).¹⁸ In all, the printed library catalog lists 591 pages of books, prints, and scientific collections. But despite the number of important texts, including many that were considered dangerous after the French Revolution, there is no evidence that the Sheremetevs absorbed their ideas or even read most of them. The books occasionally served a practical purpose (we know from his correspondence that Sheremetev read books about stage design and special effects) but they did not make the Sheremetevs Enlightenment thinkers any more than the stuffed crocodile in their *kunstkammer* made them zoologists.¹⁹

Neverov and Emmanuel Ducamp, *Great Private Collections of Imperial Russia* (New York: Vendome Press, State Hermitage Museum, 2004), 83.

¹⁷ MMUO Ostankino opis 1809, ll. 92-130.

¹⁸ Sheremetev, 54, 57, 70, 101, 115, 171, 512.

¹⁹ N. Yelizarova, *Teatry Sheremetevykh* (Moskva: Izd. Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia, 1944), 78. Some of the books include *Observations sur l'art des machines théâtrales* (1781), *Essais sur l'architecture théâtrale* (1782), *Traité de la construction des théâtres et des machines théâtrales* (Paris, 1777), and *Théatri machinarum* (undated, Leipzig). Sheremetev relied on François-Marie Hivart to supply him with these volumes and sometimes to help him interpret them. Yelizarova, 86-87.

"If I have a book to have understanding in place of me ..." wrote Kant in 1784, "I need not make any efforts at all."²⁰ The intellectual laziness that accompanied Enlightenment in some forms would seem at first glance to describe the Sheremetevs' material and consumerist engagement with the ideas of their age. As Kant put it, they were perfectly happy to let their doctors prescribe regimens for them, their priests to have a conscience for them, and their books do the grunt work of philosophy. This was a mindset in line with Lotman's conception of eighteenth-century nobility in Russia as an alienated subculture whose embrace of Western manners was merely performance. Much of the Sheremetevs' collections revealed their proficiency in the codes of elite life and their emulation of other aristocrats, but little that was original in conception or execution.

And yet, the Sheremetevs did engage sincerely (at least in some respects) with art and Enlightenment and indeed with Western Europe. Nikolai Sheremetev's Grand Tour in 1772 and 1773 was a hedonistic romp but it also revealed his curiosity about new innovations and ideas. As recounted by his traveling companion, Prince Kurakin, Sheremetev visited Matthew Boulton's Soho Manufactory outside of Birmingham.²¹ Boulton was used to receiving noble visitors from abroad, especially Russians, and had set up a reception room for this purpose several years earlier.²² Kurakin described being

²⁰ Immanuel Kant and Hans Siegbert Reiss, *Kant's Political Writings*, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics (Cambridge Eng.: University Press, 1970), 54.

²¹ For details of Sheremetev's Grand Tour, see Smith, 29-36.

²² Shena Mason and Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, *Matthew Boulton: Selling What All the World Desires* (Birmingham, England, New Haven, London: Birmingham City Council; In association with Yale University Press, 2009), 73. Boulton was one of the Lunar Men but unlike most of the others, was not an abolitionist. He owned some anti-slavery literature but did business with "merchants and landowners who

unimpressed by the fancy metalwork in the showroom but described details about the manufactory and the organization of labor, as well as attributes of neighboring factories.²³

The Sheremetevs owned several metalworking towns in Russia and it seems that the visitors were more interested in British industrial innovations rather than being fawned over in the showroom like other Russian tourists.²⁴

In Paris, Nikolai Sheremetev took music lessons from François-Marie Hivart, a second cellist at the Opéra. The two men would correspond over several decades, with Hivart acting as Sheremetev's agent in Paris, sending him the latest scores, scale models, costume designs, and commentary on the season's trends.²⁵ What is noteworthy about the relationship is that Hivart was not especially successful in the musical world and was socially unconnected. While Sheremetev lived side by side with serfs and eventually married Praskovia Kovaleva, he held no such power over Hivart, whose correspondence to him was polite but not sycophantic. Sheremetev's replies were equally respectful. The

benefited from the slave trade." S. Baggott and K. Quickenden, *Matthew Boulton: Enterprising Industrialist of the Enlightenment* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 12.

²³ F. A. Kurakin, *Arkhiv knyazya F. A. Kurakina* ed. V. N. Smolyaninov (1894), 403.

²⁴ Sheremetev never wrote down his impressions of the trip but Kurakin's views on class in Britain are interesting. He noted that the canal system in Northern England was the idea of a "simple peasant" only twenty-one years old who envisioned something worthy of the Romans. In Manchester, he and Sheremetev were shown around town by Edmund Ratcliffe, a cotton manufacturer who showed them the highlights of the city, including the manufacture of coarse, cheap clothing for slaves. Kurakin found Ratcliffe impertinent and deeply boring (the cotton tour of Manchester took more than five hours) but he did not record his thoughts on slavery. Kurakin, 398-399.

²⁵ The correspondence is described by John Rice, who notes that Hivart provides a rare first-hand account of contemporary audiences responding to Haydn, and evidence of Haydn's popularity in Russia before 1790. John A. Rice, "The Farewell Symphony Between Paris and Russia," *HAYDN: Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America* 3, no. 2 (2013), 6.

two men were able to have a conversation about opera that lasted many years, despite Hivart's low social status and financial problems.²⁶ This ongoing discussion shows that Sheremetev's interest in opera was both sincere and serious. While provincial nobles dabbled in theatrical troupes, choruses, and private operas, Sheremetev approached his own theater with an unusual degree of passion, devoting time, energy, money, and (as far as it can be concluded) a great deal of thought. His letters to Hivart often concerned minutiae, such as the best way of signaling to the twenty-seven stagehands that it was time to change the set. Would a bell, rung very softly, do the trick? Hivart replied that a bell should be used only during an emergency such as a fire. In Paris, a low whistle sufficed.²⁷ Sheremetev, a pedant and a tyrant to his talented serfs, seems to have taken the bankrupt cellist's advice.

The theater provided the Sheremetevs with a medium they could control and within which they could experiment and innovate. This was made possible by the resources, both financial and human, made available to them through the institution of serfdom. It was in this area that Sheremetevs distinguished themselves as collectors, both in the ownership of people and in the art those people produced. If the family used their conventional collections to define and portray themselves obliquely, then the art made by their own serfs made this project much more direct. Serf actors were made to sing the Sheremetevs' praises on stage, while the Argunovs and their assistants labored away at

²⁶ Sheremetev paid Hivart for his troubles but not enough to make him financially comfortable, especially after the Opéra revised its pension rules following the Revolution. Hivart's only son was killed during Napoleon's invasion of Russia and he himself died in relative poverty in 1833. Archives Nationales AJ13/01, 343-345.

²⁷ Yelizarova, 78.

intimate portraits. While this was simply how much of Russian art (visual and otherwise) during this period was created, the Sheremetevs were keenly aware of owning their artists, a fact that seemed to inspire pride and possessiveness. The elite actresses of the theater troupe were given the names of jewels and precious materials, equating them with other valuable property owned and displayed by the Sheremetev family. Nikolai Sheremetev's loge at the Ostankino theater was accessed through the picture gallery, allowing him to pass from one collection to another.²⁸ Sheremetev referred to Nikolai Argunov as "my painter."²⁹ A generation earlier, Pyotr Sheremetev displayed a similar possessiveness as he ignored requests from other noblemen to requisition Ivan Argunov. Argunov was interested only in portraits, wrote Sheremetev, and he would not do "ceilings and ornaments."³⁰ The Sheremetevs appear to have emphasized their ownership of elite serfs in many artistic contexts, from featuring the "household architect" Fyodor Argunov on the frontispiece of Makhaev's Kuskovo prints to making sure the comte de Ségur understood that all the educated artists and performers he met on his visit were their serfs.

²⁸ Details of the loge can be found in Irina Yefremova, "Paradnaya lozha grafa N. P. Sheremeteva. K voprosu o printsipakh otdelki i ubrantsva interierov Ostankinskogo dvortsa," in *Graf Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev: lichnost, deyatelnost, sudba*, ed. G. V. Vdovin (Moskva: Nash Dom, 2001), 129-142.

²⁹ For example in RGIA fond 1088, opis 1, delo 301, list 4. This is Nikolai Sheremetev's letter to Yusupov asking that "my painter" be allowed to copy pictures in the Hermitage collections.

³⁰ T. A. Selinova, *Ivan Petrovich Argunov, 1729-1802* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973), 22.

Cultivating education and talent in serfs did not preclude violence, as an incident involving Nikolai Argunov and his young student Mikhail Zatsepin revealed.³¹ In 1806, Argunov and Zatsepin were somehow involved in the breaking of a plate.³² This occurred during a period in which Argunov was assigned to oversee the Sheremetevs' orphanage and he was burdened by logistical duties including the care and repair of furniture and china.³³ In any event, Nikolai Sheremetev was so angry that he ordered Argunov to be fined one hundred rubles and Zatsepin to be "beaten with rods, lightly."³⁴ Directly following this decree was an instruction to cancel the corporal punishment in order to induce Zatsepin to tell the truth about how the plate was broken. As Varvara Rakina observes, the truth about the incident must have been displeasing to Sheremetev, who subsequently ordered Argunov's fine to be canceled but reinstated Zatsepin's beating "with rods," this time with no qualifying "lightly."³⁵

It is striking that Nikolai Sheremetev considered these duties a proper use of Nikolai Argunov's time. There were hundreds of other serfs who could have dealt with these obligations, leaving Argunov with time to paint. The relegation of Argunov to

³¹ This incident is discussed in T. A. Selinova, *Mikhail Zatsepin* (Moskva: Minuvshee, 2010), 36-37 and in Rakina (2005), 108-109. I am grateful to Varvara Rakina for discussing the events in question with me.

³² RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 239, ll. 311-312.

³³ This was related to the orphanage established in memory of Praskovia Sheremeteva. The tasks demanded of Nikolai Argunov were laborious enough to keep him from painting major portraits. Varvara Aleksandrovna Rakina, "Nikolai Argunov i problema zakazchika v russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi kontsa XVIII - pervoi chetverti XIX veka" (Gosudarstvennii institut iskusstvoznaniya 2005), 108-109.

³⁴ Ibid. and RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 239, ll. 311-312.

³⁵ Rakina (2005), 109.

menial tasks recalls Nikolai Sheremetev's treatment of Ivan Argunov, who spent the last fifteen years of his life overseeing household administration instead of portrait-making.³⁶ The incident is also noteworthy for its dramatic apposition of two types of valued artistic property: the painter and the plate. The breaking of one necessitated punishment of the other.

The punishment of Zatsepin was cruel and degrading. But it also significant how different this situation was from trans-Atlantic slavery. Like Western European slave owners, the Sheremetevs owned human beings and even put them on display. But even at their most capricious and destructive, they did not approach the degree of atrocity involved in Western chattel slavery.³⁷ But while it was possible for some Western Europeans to ignore the slaves who produced their sugar and sustained their economy, Russian aristocrats were perpetually confronted by their human property and had to find some way to come to terms with it.³⁸ While some of the nobility openly discussed

³⁶ The relegation of Argunov to administrative duties does not seem to have been exactly punitive, given the large salary and household clout of the position. See RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1584.

³⁷ Peter Kolchin compares recorded punishment of Sheremetev serfs with punishments on a plantation during the same period and concludes that while penalties were superficially similar (comparable numbers of reprimands and beatings in each context), this does not take into account the vast numbers of Sheremetev serfs and the consequently lower rate of punishment. Over a twenty-year period, only about 5% of Sheremetev serfs faced punishment thanks to their distance from administrative centers and the resulting dearth of surveillance and control in comparison with slave plantations. P. Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 125.

³⁸ Orlando Figes contrasts the Sheremetevs' massive household staff with those of British families. The Fountain House in St. Petersburg had more than 300 servants living it, while Chatsworth House had eighteen. Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 21.

serfdom and reform in the late eighteenth century, philosophical apologies for or condemnations of the institution were not as widespread as in Western Europe.³⁹ Elise Wirtschafter has written about the complications of Russian Enlightenment during this period, seeing a tendency to work through practical and immediate problems (such as the correct way to treat one's serfs) rather than confrontation of the abstractions that caused these problems.⁴⁰ This idea accurately describes much of the Sheremetevs' behavior, from their staging of plays about serfs treated well by benevolent owners to the deception necessary to ennoble Praskovia Kovaleva. It was easier to forge an archival document and make up a story than to confront the truth that a person they believed deserved to free had been living in bondage. And yet serfdom was omnipresent in the Sheremetevs' lives, and there was no way to avoid it fully.

In *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, Simon Gikandi contrasts two women of the eighteenth century: Anna Larpent, an educated theater-goer and diarist, and Nealee, a West African woman who died on her way to a coastal slave market. On the same day in 1797, Nealee was stung to death by bees while Larpent wrote commentary on Claude-

³⁹ Roger Bartlett concludes that only a small minority were discussing peasant reform during this period. He quotes V. V. Mavrodin on Bolotov and another agronomist: "One cannot escape the conclusion that even those advanced minds in the 'age of enlightenment' were just as far from the thoughts of any change in the countryside as were those nobles who wrote 'instructions' for their estate managers ... who probably would have been astonished to know of the very existence of a 'peasant question.'" V. V. Mavrodin, *Rozhdenie novoi Rossii* (Leningrad 1988), 376, quoted in Roger Bartlett, "The Question of Serfdom," in *Russia in the Age of Enlightenment: Essays for Isabel de Madariaga*, ed. Roger Bartlett and Janet M. Hartley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1990), 146.

⁴⁰ "Enlightened Russians did not produce ideologies of political opposition or movements of social reform. Instead, they focused on the practice and lived experience of the Enlightenment." Elise Kimmerling Wirtschafter, *Russia's Age of Serfdom 1649-1861* (Blackwell Pub., 2008), 163-164.

Carloman de Rulhière's *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie; en l'année 1762*. Gikandi positions the women as separate poles of the same world, "lives and experiences that were structurally connected through the political economy of slavery yet conceptually and symbolically separated."⁴¹ For the Sheremetevs, there could be no such separation. Even their most remote serfs were subject to their administration, since this was the family's primary source of income. At home, serfs were always present. Even more importantly, many of these serfs were active participants in Enlightenment culture with daily lives much closer to Larpent's than to Nealee's. In skill and education, many surpassed their owners.

Writing of portraiture and the Atlantic slave trade, Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal describe the tensions inherent in depicting slaves:

In the context of imperial and colonial slavery, portraiture occupied and ambivalent position. The period marked by an expanding trade in human bodies coincided with the emergence of portraiture as a major field of representation in Western art. Yet, the two categories "slave" and "portraiture" appear to be mutually exclusive or, as David Bindman puts it, oxymoronic. The logic of chattel slavery strived to produce the body of the slave in a very restricted manner: as a purely instrumentalized being, as a body dwelling in the eternal present of labor, reproduction, and punishment. The body of the slave appears as the site of a nonsubject, of an entity without memory or history — the slave as pure bodiliness and immanence. Portraiture, on the other hand, insists on the face as a primary site of an imagined subjectivity, often at the expense of the rest of the body.⁴²

Again, the Sheremetevs' serfs existed within a radically different framework. Serfs were the subjects of portraits, their faces and even (as Daniel Roche writes of Enlightenment portraits in France) their "multiplicity of being, the myriad of different states, faces, and

⁴¹ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 52, 54.

⁴² Agnes I. Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7-8.

secrets, the variety of individuals" on full display.⁴³ And the subjectivity of serfs extended even further into the realm of representation; after all, the Argunovs were allowed to perceive, compose, and record the physiognomies of those around them. The "memory and history" of the Sheremetev family was, in fact, entrusted to them.

There were slaves in Britain and its colonies who made art, visual and otherwise. Phillis Wheatley, who arrived in Boston at age seven, had been taken from the Senegambian coast and subjected to the Middle Passage; she was named after the slave ship *Phillis*.⁴⁴ Wheatley was taught to speak, read, and write English by the couple who bought her and they eventually encouraged her to write poetry. Henry Louis Gates, in his treatment of Wheatley, focuses on the moment in 1772 when she was brought before a tribunal of eighteen learned men, charged with determining whether she had written her own poems or whether they were a fraud. Wheatley passed the test, and the attestation of the committee was key to the publication and dissemination of her work, which reached Washington and Voltaire and influenced international discussions about slavery.⁴⁵ Wheatley is in many ways a parallel to the Argunovs, an artist in servitude who was encouraged by her owners, who produced work that praised the powerful, and who was eventually freed. Wheatley was also a sitter for one of very few enslaved portraitists,

⁴³ Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, Harvard historical studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 546.

⁴⁴ Henry Louis Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's first Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010), 17-18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30, 33, 37. Thomas Jefferson was contemptuous of Wheatley's abilities, seeing no evidence that her intellect was discordant with the institution of slavery. Gates quotes Jefferson: "Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration, never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture." *Ibid.*, 43.

Scipio Moorhead.⁴⁶ But despite these similarities, the Argunovs' experience differed dramatically from Wheatley's. While this may be partially attributable to the fact that they were men, it also had to do with the difference between serfdom and slavery. The authorship of their paintings was never in question. And indeed, while serfs' participation in Enlightenment art was considered worrisome, the question raised by writers from Shuvalov to Ségur was not whether they could make art, but whether they should.

Zatsepin's whipping, as harsh as it was, was not entirely due to his status as a serf. Corporal punishment was common in Russia, although nobles were legally exempt from it during this period.⁴⁷ Zatsepin had the misfortune to live in an era where beating or whipping was an acceptable way to express anger toward certain segments of society. More noteworthy than his punishment was the way that Sheremetev approached the problem. Nikolai Argunov, it appears, was able to talk his way out of his fine. It is unclear whether he persuaded Sheremetev of his blamelessness or if his status as a portraitist helped him avoid the penalty just as it presumably had exempted him from the humiliation of whipping. Not only was Sheremetev intimately involved in the disciplinary matter, he was willing to gather more evidence and to change his mind. The incident encompasses the full spectrum of the Sheremetevs' serf ownership, from

⁴⁶ See Eric Slauter, "Looking for Scipio Moorhead" in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Isabel de Madariaga charts the shifting landscape of these statutes: nobles were declared immune from corporal punishment in 1785, the immunity was canceled under Paul, and finally it was restored by Alexander in 1801. Even during the period when it was legal, these penalties were very rare for nobles. There were accounts that Catherine had noblewomen whipped for spreading rumors about her, but these are difficult to substantiate. I. de Madariaga, *Politics and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Collected Essays by Isabel de Madariaga* (Taylor & Francis, 2014), 112, 114.

physical cruelty to the limited privileges of the most elite serfs (in this case, Argunov). Even painters had to perform menial labor and were at risk of pain and disgrace if they displeased their owners. But the matter also revealed the clout of Argunov and those in his position, even as they worked under adverse conditions. It seems that Sheremetev was willing to alter his decision and his opinions about the incident, to seek out more evidence, to imagine the subjective reactions of his young serf who he assumed would be unwilling to tell the truth with the threat of whipping looming over him. Despite the cruelty of the punishment, the incident shows that Sheremetev approached the problems of serf ownership with reason and logic (not to mention administrative paperwork). It also appears that Argunov was able to negotiate a way out of his own punishment, though he could not or did not stop Zatselin's.

III. Sheremetev serfs and their collections

In attempting to gauge the importance of ownership to Sheremetev serfs, I return to the fight in Kitai Gorod in 1815. At the end of their period of servitude, Nikolai and Yakov Argunov began a dispute over Yakov's print collection that raises questions about the experience of Sheremetev householders, their privileges and limitations as elite serfs, and the role of artistic property in identity and status. As discussed in the introduction, Nikolai Argunov accused his younger brother Yakov of stealing prints from the Sheremetevs, instigating an investigation that delayed Yakov's manumission by several months.⁴⁸ Rakina speculates that the origins of the argument might have stemmed from Nikolai's petition for manumission, which he completed separately from his brother in a way that might have benefitted himself and impeded Yakov, who was to teach drawing at

⁴⁸ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1617.

a Moscow school.⁴⁹ Materials about the case indicate that there were ninety-seven prints in Yakov Argunov's collection and that it was ultimately decided that he had inherited, bought, or otherwise gainfully acquired all of them.⁵⁰ Yakov was formally discharged from serfdom in 1816.

Evidence of Yakov Argunov's prints was saved by chance; the dispute is the only surviving paperwork related to the collection. Elite Sheremetev serfs may have owned many valuable or interesting objects, but since their quarters were not usually included in the family's sweeping inventories, it is impossible to know for sure. Nevertheless, the few instances that have been preserved in the family's archive reveal that the belongings of serfs could be notable and could cause problems. I will conclude my dissertation by discussing three examples of serfs who owned art that the Sheremetevs either investigated or remarked upon: the print dispute, an incident involving Nikolai Argunov and a portrait of Nikolai Sheremetev, and a trompe l'oeil watercolor owned by Tatiana Shlykova. All three cases involve questions of ownership during periods when the serfs involved were either close to manumission or had already attained it. And all three incidents show how important owning art could be for the most ambitious and elite Sheremetev serfs who envisioned a life of freedom. Like the Sheremetevs, these serfs were able to "stage a self" with their belongings. But the consequences of increased social status were more concrete and dramatic, given that manumission was a real possibility for the wealthiest and most talented of the serf performers and artists.

⁴⁹ Rakina (2005), 129-130.

⁵⁰ Yakov Argunov had to write to administrators in February of 1816 to ask what was taking them so long (RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1615, l. 11).

The print uproar reveals several things. First of all, it was possible for the young Yakov Argunov, who did not receive the illustrious commissions and bonuses that Nikolai did, to own ninety-seven prints, including works by Poussin, David, Rembrandt, Chardin, Greuze, and Kauffmann (figure 4.3). The artists' names were catalogued by the administrators who investigated the case, suggesting that this was important; an 1810 inventory of the Sheremetevs' print collections on view included a description of subject matter but not the artist or engraver.⁵¹ Secondly, Argunov's claim to these prints was regarded as suspicious. His brother's accusations were enough to launch a multi-month investigation and threatened his manumission. Finally, Sheremetev functionaries decided that his ownership of the prints was legitimate. The household was experiencing a power vacuum of sorts (Dmitri Sheremetev, orphaned since 1809, was only twelve years old), and it is possible that the administrators decided to overlook any malfeasance in the interest of expediency. However, their conclusion that Argunov had accounted for the origins of the prints through legitimate means, such as inheriting some of them from Ivan Argunov, suggests that this may actually have been the case, or at least that this explanation was plausible enough to conclude the investigation.

Like Nikifor Sezemov, the wealthy factory owner, Yakov Argunov owned something. But although Sezemov was rich, his humble clothing in the Levitsky portrait shows the limitations of his wealth: he had money and power but was not conversant with the norms of elite Russian life. Furthermore, his money could be confiscated without any pretext. Argunov, on the other hand, owned a collection that said something about him: about his family, his profession, his influences, his taste. The collection surely provided

⁵¹ See MMUO Opis 1810 Estampnaya.

some measure of financial security to him. While the value of the prints is not recorded, the Sheremetevs paid up to hundreds of rubles each for Western European engravings.⁵² Argunov's were presumably considered of similar value or quality since he was suspected of stealing them from the family that owned him. As the investigation itself proved, this was a category of property that could not simply be taken away without due process. But most importantly, the collection prepared him for a professional life and an identity outside of the Sheremetev household. Argunov would go on to make engravings of important historical figures and it is possible that his collection, in all its variety, had some influence on his later life.⁵³ The prints also show that despite being confined to one household and being forced to paint relatively conservative portraits for the Sheremetevs, the Argunovs still managed to seek out art of their own. One of the items listed in the investigative dossier was a print of Chardin's "Young Student Drawing" (1738), probably by Jean-Jacques Flipart. It is tempting to imagine Argunov looking at Chardin's depiction of professional seriousness and absorption and seeing another way of life. Modern and antique, conservative and cutting edge, ninety-seven prints gave Yakov Argunov a window toward Europe, the Enlightenment, and the possibilities of image-making free from autocratic patronage.

Several years after the manumission of both brothers, Nikolai Argunov again found himself embroiled in a household dispute. In 1818, Stepan Mamantov, a Sheremetev administrator in St. Petersburg wrote to a Moscow counterpart to complain

⁵² A crucifixion from the painter Lampi cost 400 rubles. RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4820, list 109.

⁵³ N. G. Presnova, *Argunovy, krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*, ed. N. G. Presnova (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2005). 182-196.

about a problem. Dmitri Sheremetev, Nikolai and Praskovia's son who was fifteen years old at that point, had a copy but not the original of a Nikolai Argunov portrait of his father. Mamantov explained that Argunov had been asked to return the portrait but had refused, "improbably" (невероятно) offering to paint another copy for Nikolai's "dear son." Mamantov seemed angry at Argunov's behavior, noting that he was "cheating" his lord, who had given him both an education in painting and the freedom he was presently enjoying.⁵⁴ Over the course of the next year, Mamantov sent several letters to his colleague indicating that when Argunov returned to Moscow, the painting should be taken away from him (it is unclear why Mamantov did not attempt to do so himself in St. Petersburg). In February of 1820, Dmitri Sheremetev issued a terse order to "stop demanding the portrait from Argunov."⁵⁵ The file doesn't contain any further information and presumably the case was dropped.

The matter of the portrait shows that Argunov took at least one of the portraits he had made as a serf with him as he transitioned to a professional career at the Academy, and also that the Sheremetev administrators thought that this was illicit, or at least that they had the right to take it back on behalf of the household. In other words, the painting was Sheremetev property despite being in the possession of a free man. Serfs, generally speaking, were not able to own property outright; it was only in 1801 that freed serfs

⁵⁴ RGIA fond 1088 opis 3 delo 1618, ll.1-2. The painting was needed so that Borovikovsky could make a posthumous portrait of Nikolai Sheremetev to commemorate his patronage of the orphanage. See Rakina (2004), 120, 124, 127.

⁵⁵ RGIA fond 1088 opis 3 delo 1618., l. 17.

obtained the right to buy land.⁵⁶ Serfs in bondage could not even possess movable property. In 1765, Catherine II had overseen an essay competition about how the lot of serfs could be improved. One of the winning entries had suggested that lords should not be able to confiscate their serfs' movable property and should even lend them such possessions that they could not attain for themselves.⁵⁷ Despite the law, however, serfs did have their own property and possessions. This gulf between theory and practice was most conspicuous with industrialists like Sezemov, from whom the Sheremetevs extorted money but who was able not only to operate businesses, but also to own several dozen of his own serfs and accumulate enough wealth to comfortably subsidize the Moscow Foundling Hospital. While manumission documents are not very detailed, they showed that when the Sheremetevs freed their elite serfs, it was usually with financial settlements; if property was confiscated upon manumission, it does not seem to appear in the record books.⁵⁸ The practice of letting serfs own property was less kind than expedient; Sezemov was of better use to the Sheremetevs as a successful businessman than as a pauper, and the possessions (and money) of elite household serfs mostly came from the Sheremetevs anyway. Letting go of serfs' accumulated property was usually a smaller loss than freeing the elite serfs themselves.

⁵⁶ B.N. Mironov, *The Standard of Living and Revolutions in Russia, 1700-1917* (Routledge, 2012), 196.

⁵⁷ Paul Dukes, *Catherine the Great and the Russian Nobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 95.

⁵⁸ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1562. Serfs freed in 1803 were given their salary at least — Tatiana Shlykova received 500 rubles, her father 94 rubles, her sister 153 rubles, and Pyotr Kalmykov, a relative of Praskovia Kovaleva, 237 rubles. (list 35). Shlykova would also receive a much larger sum after Nikolai Sheremetev's death. For less socially connected serfs, it was necessary to buy their freedom with cash.

As far as I am aware, Mamontov's demand to Argunov was the only one of its kind. More than any conception of property, it indicates that Sheremetev householders considered Argunov still to be bound by the norms of serfdom — the need to defer to a Sheremetev's wishes — even if he had been freed. It is also significant that Argunov chose to take the portrait with him, especially after all the trouble with Yakov and the prints. In late 1815, as he was awaiting manumission, the household may have been chaotic enough that he was able to take a sample or samples of his work to help him in his later career. It is also possible that he considered the portrait to be his; after all, he had painted it. In any case, like his brother, he took art with him away from serfdom and away from the Sheremetevs. While no diaries or personal writings survive from Nikolai Argunov, his correspondence with Mamontov suggests that he felt no sense of obligation to the family that had once owned him.

Little documentation was preserved concerning the possessions of the elite actresses, with the exception of Praskovia Sheremeteva's belongings. Even before her marriage, Kovaleva had her own suite in Ostankino palace that was richly furnished and decorated with the anonymous pastel portrait of herself discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation.⁵⁹ After her death, inventories revealed her jewelry collection (275 pieces) and other material trappings of her nobility.⁶⁰ It is difficult, however, to distinguish the extent to which she controlled her possessions or wealth. The jewelry was nearly all gifts from her husband, who also would have had the final say over her living

⁵⁹ Presnova, 131.

⁶⁰ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1314.

quarters and furniture. The account of her life was influenced by Nikolai Sheremetev's agenda after her death.

Tatiana Shlykova, the foremost ballet dancer of the theater troupe, also accumulated art and furniture. Freed after Praskovia Sheremeteva's death, she stayed on with the Sheremetevs and raised Dmitri after his father's death in 1809. She was functionally the head of the household until Dmitri's majority and, according to Sergei Sheremetev, took pride in her private apartment.⁶¹ Her living quarters contained a portrait Praskovia Sheremetev as well as views of Ostankino and Kuskovo.⁶² In his account of her life, Sergei Sheremetev mentions a side table with a trompe l'oeil panel that she particularly liked; at some point, probably after her death, a metal plaque was affixed to it that said "СТОЛЬ ТАТЬЯНЫ ВАСИЛЬЕВНЫ ШЛЫКОВОЙ" (Tatiana Vasilievna Shlykova's table) (figure 4.4).⁶³ There is no detailed account of why the table resonated so strongly with Shlykova or about the circumstances of its production. But the object is unusual enough, both in its conception and its unequivocal association with a former serf performer, that I will end my discussion of collecting with this case.

The table was constructed around the year 1800 but the watercolor trompe l'oeil top is dated 1795.⁶⁴ Shlykova was still a serf within this range of dates. The watercolor is

⁶¹ Sheremetev describes both the artwork and the furnishings in her apartment, noting that she insisted on cleanliness and order. Sergei Dmitrievich Sheremetev, *Tatiana Vasilevna Shlykova* (1889), 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶³ T. Orlova and K. Sokolova, *Russkaya mebel v Gosudarstvennom Ermitazhe* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1973), 92-93.

⁶⁴ I am grateful to Hermitage curators Ivan Garmanov and Yuri Gudymenko for showing me the table and explaining the rationale for the date.

a quodlibet composition with everyday objects (lace, pages from books, a ribbon, playing cards, a map, letters, a colored print, and a silhouette) scattered over an imitation wood surface (figure 4.5). The work is signed "рисоваль Тертій борноволоквь 1795го году" (drawn by Tertii Bornovolokov, 1795). A card in the top left corner (under the lace) also has Bornovolokov's name; there is nothing within the composition that refers to Shlykova or to the Sheremetevs. Bornovolokov was a chemist affiliated with the Academy of Sciences who was best known for translating and publishing a pamphlet critical of Voltaire ("Изобличенный Вольтер" or "Voltaire Exposed") in 1792.⁶⁵ He would eventually die in Alaska in 1813 during the wreck of the Russian-American Company's ship *Neva*.⁶⁶

There appears to be no archival evidence about how the watercolor ended up in Shlykova's possession. It might have been a gift to her from Bornovolokov, since she would have socialized with upper-class audience members and we know from surviving correspondence that some of these men carried on public flirtations with her. Pyotr Usorov, writing to Nikolai Sheremetev after the theater troupe was dissolved, asked him to pass along regards to "Tanush, although she will not remember me."⁶⁷ A present from Bornovolokov could have fallen into this category of performative courtliness, although

⁶⁵ Bornovolokov's purpose in disseminating the tract, he wrote in his introduction, was to show Russian youth how "falsely and impertinently" ("сколь лживо и дерзко") Voltaire wrote about religion. He did concede that Voltaire was a great dramatic writer. Tertii Stepanovich Bornovolokov, "Izoblichennyi Volter" (Sankt Peterbourg 1792), vi.

⁶⁶ Bornovolokov's life is discussed in K. V. Kostrin, "Zabytyi russkii uchenyi Tertii Bornovolokov," *Letopis Severa* 4 (1964) but unfortunately no mention is made of his theatrical enthusiasms.

⁶⁷ RGADA fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr 4814, l. 9.

the absence of anything overtly romantic — or indeed about Shlykova — makes this less likely.⁶⁸

Whatever the origins of the table, it clearly was a prized possession of Shlykova's. It evoked, in concert with the Nikolai and Praskovia Sheremeteva portraits and the images of Sheremetev country estates, the height of Shlykova's ballet career in the 1790s. Its subject matter alludes to the rich range of influences on Russian culture during this period. A page from a Slavonic prayer book partially covers prints and a torn map of Western Europe. A letter in French, addressed to a recipient in Moscow, lies on top of a Russian text about the Duke of Brunswick. A silhouette seems to depict the profile of Voltaire, whom Bornovolokov had excoriated three years earlier.⁶⁹ Most prominently featured is the frontispiece of the Prussian historian and toxicologist Johann Samuel Halle's *Magie, oder die Zauberkräfte der Natur*. Purportedly a history of magic, the book also discussed printmaking, optical toys, electricity and magnetism, automata, and other current innovations.⁷⁰ In concert, the documents represent a varied intellectual life in dialogue with local and foreign influences.

⁶⁸ Sergei Sheremetev noted that Shlykova never spoke about any relationships that she may have had in the past except the courtship he described involving the proprietor of the English store in St. Petersburg. According the Sheremetev, Shlykova claimed not to have been a beauty but he cited Argunov's 1789 portrait of her (by then at Kuskovo), and noted her "lively, intelligent eyes." Sheremetev, 17.

⁶⁹ The silhouette, with its pointed nose, furrowed brow, and doubled chin, resembles Houdon's statue of Voltaire that is now in the Hermitage. However, this identification is tentative.

⁷⁰ J.S. Halle, *Magie, oder, Die Zauberkräfte der Natur: so auf den Nutzen und die Belustigung angewandt worden* (Gedruckt bey Johann Thomas Edlen von Trattnern, 1787).

Trompe l'oeil was already a genre associated with summer estates and the nobility. Bolotov's domestic album was full of visual trickery that mimicked his ludic garden designs.⁷¹ Russian aristocrats, including the Sheremetevs, populated their estates with *obmanki*, painted shams meant to trick the eye. Pyotr Sheremetev's study at Kuskovo had several trompe l'oeil paintings on the wall with simulated books (in French, Latin, and Russian), household objects, a few paintings and prints, and a parrot.⁷² A desk in the same room reproduced Makhaev's view of the Kuskovo gardens in marquetry.⁷³ Working on household matters in his office, Sheremetev could look down at an aerial view of his estate, made by his own serfs, and look up at playful paintings fixing in time the ephemera of the *usadba*.

We do not know exactly what Shlykova, who was very religious in later life, thought of the Enlightenment and this approach to it. As a performer, she might have appreciated the playful approach to reality and deception. Bornovolokov's table may also have provided a sense of mastery and ownership similar to trompe l'oeil paintings in elite contexts. The illusion necessitated a certain degree of visual sophistication and the

⁷¹ Thomas Newlin, "Moving Pictures: The Optics of Serfdom on the Russian Estate," in *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, ed. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 72.

⁷² L. V. Syagaeva, *Kuskovo* (Moskva: Tritona 2012). 120-121. These was painted by Grigory Nikolaevich Teplov and Trofim Ulianov, once thought to be Sheremetev serfs. Iosif Glozman discovered that Teplov was a secretary to Catherine II and Ulianov was also a free man. The two had attended Feofan Prokopovich's seminary, where drawing was part of the curriculum. Iosif Glozman, "K istorii russkogo natyurmorta," in *Russkoe iskusstvo XVIII veka: materialy i issledovaniya*, ed. Tatiana Vasilevna Alekseeva (Moskva: Izdatelstvo Iskusstvo, 1968), 57.

⁷³ This table was made by Nikifor Vasiliev. See A. Chenevière, *Russian Furniture: The Golden Age, 1780-1840* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2001), 33.

eclectic contents required fluency in Russian and Western texts. The watercolor's firm date — 1795 — suggested that even in the period of her servitude, Shlykova had been acquiring and displaying elite artwork. To be sure, the watercolor is an amateur piece, but in the context of serf professionalism, this only heightens the prestige of the object. Not only is the piece a trompe l'oeil, a genre strongly associated with elite amateurism, but Shlykova also coopted Bornovolokov's private project, transforming it into a utilitarian object for her own use. It did not matter whether she had a personal relationship with Bornovolokov or not; her display of the watercolor implied an intimacy that reversed the norms of her theater troupe and the serf art production context more generally. Shlykova may have danced for an audience but it seems that her audience made art for her as well. Like Praskovia Kovaleva's diamond ring from Catherine, the trompe l'oeil was a material sign of her success and rising social status that she continued to value long after she won freedom and financial security.

IV. Conclusion

The Sheremetev family collected a staggering number of objects. Their wealth, a result of the serfs they owned, allowed them to accumulate and display everything fashionable and appropriate to their station as aristocrats of the Russian Enlightenment, from snuffboxes to Encyclopédies. The most privileged of their serfs also collected money, art, and belongings, saving for manumission, preparing for a life beyond serfdom, or simply seeking some tenuous financial security. What owner and serf had in common was an understanding of how valuable art — and particularly portraiture — could be. For the Sheremetevs, commissioning and hanging paintings allowed them to visualize the complications of their family and their control of others, and to represent these things in

the most advantageous terms possible. The process of commissioning was accompanied by the power of ownership. The Sheremetevs could force the Argunovs and their other artists to look closely at their subjects and to absorb the complicated narratives they wished to be conveyed. Perhaps unwittingly, the Sheremetevs' greatest artistic legacy was the portraiture made by their serfs. More than any other noble family, they realized the potential of talented serfs and the value of the work they could do.

Meanwhile, sometimes in secret, serfs were also collecting. They too understood how powerful a work of art could be. For Sezemov, a portrait put him in the company of Russia's wealthiest luminaries, giving him the social power his ersatz serf ownership could not fully provide. For Yakov Argunov, diverse prints gave him a glimpse of the wider world and prepared him for a professional career as a free artist. For Nikolai Argunov, keeping his portrait may have been an assertion of his rights as an artist, a statement that he owned his own work whatever the law said to the contrary. Later on, the Nikolai Sheremetev portrait became a way to assert his legal and practical independence when Sheremetev administrators expected him to grovel. For Tatiana Shlykova, an amateur watercolor was one of the few pieces she took with her from Moscow, where she would not return until she was nearly ninety years old.⁷⁴ This trompe l'oeil, usually reserved for the class of people who had owned and controlled her, ended up as a part of her fashionable side-table in her St. Petersburg apartment. Illegally and sometimes covertly, Sheremetev serfs asserted their ability to own art even when they themselves were considered to be property. That they took this art with them as they left servitude —

⁷⁴ Sheremetev, 15.

even fighting for the right to keep it — only shows how important it was in the transition from serfdom to freedom.

Conclusion

After the death of Nikolai Sheremetev in 1809, art production in the Sheremetev household largely ceased. The operatic troupes had been dormant since Praskovia Kovaleva's illness in the late 1790s, and by the early nineteenth century, only a few choruses were active.¹ Nikolai and Yakov Argunov were freed in Sheremetev's will along with Mikhail Zatsepin and many of the administrators who had overseen the family's artistic projects; both Argunovs and Zatsepin went on to become professional artists. Dmitri Sheremetev was only seven years old when his father died, and it would be years before he developed projects of his own. As it happened, the hiatus in art made by Sheremetev serfs coincided with a general decline in serf theater, which never saw a revival after the difficult years of Napoleon's invasion.² Serf portraitists had also experienced their peak in the eighteenth century, and later serf artists specialized in landscape and genre scenes.³ The Argunovs' work hung in the Sheremetev palace, and few people saw or remarked upon it in the nineteenth century. By 1900, it seemed that the Argunovs had faded permanently into obscurity.

To conclude this project, I will examine several distinct moments of interest in the Argunovs and the Sheremetev household during the time of Pyotr Borisovich and Nikolai Petrovich, the same period that the Argunovs were active. I will focus on three episodes: Sergei Diaghilev's inclusion of the Argunovs in his groundbreaking project on

¹ RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1550, ll. 44ob-45, 51.

² Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 237-238.

³ These include Vasily Tropinin and Grigory Soroka (and others in Aleksey Venestianov's circle).

eighteenth-century art history, Soviet-era interest in both the Argunovs and Kovaleva as emblems of serf achievement, and Anna Akhmatova's use of Praskovia Sheremeteva as a poetic motif. In twentieth-century revivals and tributes, the Argunovs found recognition that was never accorded to them in their lifetimes. Praskovia Sheremeteva's biography resonated in an era of complicated nostalgia and new ways of interpreting the past. The varying interpretations assigned to the Argunovs' work and to the relationship between Nikolai Sheremetev and Praskovia Kovaleva underline the difficulties in understanding them, but also their richness of possible meanings and evocations.

The first major display of Argunov paintings was thanks to Sergei Diaghilev, who before the heyday of the Ballets Russes was involved with the aesthetic group *Mir Iskusstva* and their publication of the same name. Diaghilev was interested in reviving eighteenth-century Russian art, largely overlooked at the time, and intended to write a book about the Argunovs along with Levitsky, Borovikovsky, Antropov, Rokotov, Shchukin, Shibanov, and Drozhdin, a group he considered the most remarkable ("замечательнейших") artists of the eighteenth century.⁴ Unfortunately, only the Levitsky volume was completed. Nevertheless, Diaghilev included more than two dozen Argunov paintings (attributed to Ivan, Nikolai, and Yakov) in his 1905 exhibit of "historical portraits" at the Tauride Palace.⁵ In the context of the exhibit, which consisted of more than two thousand paintings, this was not an overwhelming number. But Diaghilev's scholarly interest in the Argunovs, even though he did not finish his book

⁴ Sergei Diaghilev, *Russkaya zhivopis v XVIII veke. Tom pervy: D. G. Levitsky* (St. Petersburg, 1902), 3.

⁵ "Katalog istoriko-khudozhestvennoi vystavki," (Sankt Peterburg 1905), 8-9, 12, 20, 22, 50, 54-55.

about them, introduced the artists to the general public and signaled a new interest in portraiture from the eighteenth century.

By the time of the Tauride exhibition, Diaghilev had been researching eighteenth-century painting for many years. His aim was not only to include portraits from this period in critical and scholarly assessments of Russian aesthetics, but to begin the process of archival research about artists who had been neglected or even completely forgotten. It was Diaghilev, for example, who discovered that the 1787 portrait of Catherine the Great in a traveling costume was by the serf painter Shibanov and not the academician Shabanov.⁶ In 1902, Diaghilev wrote an article in *Mir Iskusstva* with nine corrections to the catalog of an earlier "historical portrait" exhibit, including the information that Anton Losenko had been the student of Ivan Argunov, not Yakov Argunov.⁷ The effect of this research transformed scholarly understanding of the eighteenth century. In her assessment of the exhibit, Lynn Garafola quotes Igor Grabar: "In place of conflicting data and vague facts, it became possible, for the first time, using the gigantic quantities of material gathered from all over Russia ... to throw new light on interlocking sources, relations, and influences, unsuspected before."⁸ Yet despite his pioneering research, Diaghilev put the Tauride exhibit together hastily and had no time to write full catalog entries or contextualizing essays. As a result, the exhibition appears to have been somewhat overwhelming to its visitors. It functioned less as a sober scholarly project and

⁶ G. V. Zhidkov, *M. Shibanov, khudozhnik vtoroi poloviny XVIII veka* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1954), 5.

⁷ Sergei Diaghilev, "Podrobnyi illyustrirovannyi kalatog vystavki russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi za 150 let 1700-1850," *Mir Iskusstva* 8 (1902), 23.

⁸ L. Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Da Capo Press, Incorporated, 2009), 169.

more, according to John Bowl, as a "spectacle" or even "a creative laboratory" that presaged Diaghilev's Salon d'Automne in Paris and the Ballets Russes.⁹

Of the Argunov portraits included in the exhibit, more than a dozen were ascribed to Nikolai, eight to Ivan, and one to Yakov.¹⁰ However, despite Diaghilev's interest in scholarly accuracy, the attributions are muddled. "The Unknown Woman in Russian Costume (Anna Buyanova?)" by Ivan Argunov, completed before Nikolai Argunov was even born, is listed under Nikolai's name; this was the first time it was displayed in an exhibit.¹¹ Ivan Yakimov is listed as Ivan Lazarev, a misidentification that wouldn't be corrected until Kostikova published her analysis of the painting in 1973.¹² This was probably the result of the exhibit's hasty genesis and a general lack of information about the Argunovs, whose work was mostly located in private houses during this period. Early misconceptions aside, the paintings that Diaghilev chose are diverse in subject matter, from portraits of the Sheremetev men to the woman in peasant costume and the young Ivan Yakimov on stage.¹³

⁹ Bowl, 77. Only one Argunov portrait went to Paris — Nikolai Argunov's painting of an unknown man in a green coat. Sergei Diaghilev, *Exposition de l'art russe [à Paris]: salon d'automne* (Paris: Moreau frères, 1906), 20. See also N. G. Presnova, *Argunovy, krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh*, ed. N. G. Presnova (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2005), 121.

¹⁰ Diaghilev, "Katalog istoriko-khudozhestvennoi vystavki," 8, 16, 20, 50, 54-56, 65, 68, 76.

¹¹ Presnova, 76.

¹² N. R. Kostikova, "Novoe ob "Amure" N. Argunova," *Iskusstvo*, no. 3 (1973), 68-69.

¹³ Diaghilev, "Katalog istoriko-khudozhestvennoi vystavki," 54-56.

It is a shame that Diaghilev never followed through on his scholarly project about the Argunovs because their prominence in the Tauride exhibit and his esteem for Ivan Argunov (clearly expressed in the introduction of his Levitsky volume) indicate a nuanced appreciation for their work. In Bowlt's words, the focus of the Tauride exhibit was "theatrical gesture, pose, and dress ... Diaghilev was well aware of the social and cultural prerogatives whereby generals pointed, young ladies minced, and elderly countesses admonished as they observed their strict, highly controlled rituals and deportments — no less expressive than the entrechats and pirouettes of the ballet dancer."¹⁴ Within this context, it is remarkable that Diaghilev included paintings by the Argunovs not just of noble sitters, but of serfs. Diaghilev recognized that it was not just the aristocracy who participated in the rituals and performance of elite society, but those of lower rank who watched nobles carefully both as sitters and as painters. He appreciated both the quality of the Argunov portraits and their place within the chaotic, expansive vision of eighteenth-century history that he constructed in the Tauride exhibition.

After the Russian Revolution, the Sheremetev palaces were nationalized and their art collections disbursed to public collections.¹⁵ This was the beginning of canonical status for the Argunovs, whose paintings were displayed alongside other artists of their period in the Tretyakov, the Hermitage, the Russian State Museum, and other collections. The Argunovs and Praskovia Sheremeteva became politically as well as aesthetically

¹⁴ Bowlt, 85.

¹⁵ For an account of the Sheremetevs after the Revolution, see Douglas Smith, *Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

interesting to the new regime. Serfs who excelled in the arts presented an opportunity to celebrate Russia's past while highlighting themes of oppression and class conflict.¹⁶

These priorities allowed the Sheremetev palaces to be preserved and turned into monuments that Douglas Smith describes as "shrines" to the Russian peasant.¹⁷

Ostankino became a museum of serf art. Kuskovo, meticulously restored, was a place for Russians to contemplate the decadence of Imperial life so they could, in the words of a Soviet guidebook quoted by Douglas Smith, "better know their enemy, and consequently develop a deeper and more conscious hatred toward him."¹⁸ Needless to say, this theme was not universally carried through in the former Sheremetev palaces, nor in Soviet scholarship. The splendor and luxury of the Sheremetev houses apparently undermined the social lesson supposedly contained within. Despite early attempts to reframe the mansions as testaments to serf creativity, this theme faded from view as the twentieth century progressed. Catalogs from Ostankino, still called a museum of serf art well into the 1980s, included paintings by the Argunovs and applied arts made by Sheremetev serfs but did not belabor the point.

The Sheremetevs may have been cast as emblems of the old regime, but this kind of association was not necessarily negative during the difficult years of the 1930s and the

¹⁶ An example of this approach is M. D. Kurmacheva, *Krepostnaia intelligentsiia Rossii: vtoraiia polovina XVIII — nacholo XIX veka* (Moskva: Izd-vo Nauka, 1983). Kurmacheva presents the accomplishments of serf intellectuals within a framework of Marxist philosophy.

¹⁷ Douglas Smith, *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁸ Adel Alekseeva and M. D. Kovaleva, *Sheremetevy v sudbe Rossii: vospominaniia, dnevniki, pisma* (Moskva: Zvonitsa, 2001), 397. Quoted in (and translated by) Smith, 4.

second world war. The Sheremetev palaces, particularly the Fountain House, had been the sites of many historical events after their zenith in the eighteenth century. Orest Kiprensky, born a serf, painted the most enduring portrait of Pushkin in his studio at the Fountain House, and Turgenev eventually lived there as well.¹⁹ Beginning in 1918, Anna Akhmatova lived for many decades in a wing of the Fountain House, at first with her second husband, Vladimir Shileiko, and then in a different communal apartment with her third, Nikolai Punin, who was the director of the Hermitage.²⁰ After Punin was exiled to a labor camp for the crime of "toadying to the West" (after giving a lecture that praised Manet and Monet's Rouen cathedral series), Akhmatova stayed in their communal apartment until 1952.²¹

According to Nina Popova, Akhmatova "experienced the Fountain House as a kind of many-layered text."²² From the start, she was fascinated by the history of the

¹⁹ Adel Alekseeva, *Koltso grafini Sheremetevoi* (Moskva Terra Knizhnyi Klub, 2003), 402.

²⁰ The division of the Fountain House into communal apartments was part of a larger ideological project, what Svetlana Boym calls "a revolutionary experiment in living, an attempt to practice utopian ideologies and to destroy bourgeois banality." Svetlana Boym, *Common Places* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 125. Akhmatova settled in with not just Punin but his step-mother, his previous wife, and his daughter.

²¹ Punin denied the charge of toadyism, or "bowing down before the bourgeois art of the West," by stating that a true artist should not bow down before anything. N. Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Brill, 2012), 280. On Punin's subversive activities, Aleksandr Gerasimov wrote "Let us not forget that within the walls of the All Russian Academy of Art not long ago worked such enemies of Soviet Realistic art as the not unknown N Punin and his followers ... eulogizing Cezanne, Matisse, and other ancestors of contemporary decadent bourgeois art." Quoted in D. Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (OUP Oxford, 2003), 514-515.

²² Nina Ivanovna Popova and O. E. Rubinchik, *Anna Akhmatova in the Fountain House* (Moscow: Krasnaya Zvezda, 2003), 41.

palace, counting tree rings with Shileiko and realizing that the courtyard predated St. Petersburg itself.²³ For Akhmatova, the Sheremetevs were a ghostly presence, emblems of a vanished past. Praskovia Sheremeteva was particularly intriguing to her. In notes and drafts for "Poem Without a Hero," Sheremeteva — or "Parasha," in the diminutive — appears at several points before disappearing from the final text. A 1964-1965 note from Akhmatova lays out her impression of Sheremetev history:

5 января 1941 г. Фонтанный дом... При шведах здесь была мыза... Когда Параша Жемчугова мучилась в родах, здесь строили какие-то свадебные [трибуны] галереи для предстоящих торжеств ее свадьбы. Параша, как известно, умерла в родах, и состоялись совсем другие торжества [другого рода]. Рядом с комнатами автора знаменитый "Белый зал" работы Кваренги, где когда-то за зеркалами прятался Павел I и подслушивал, что о нем говорят бальные гости Шереметевых. В этом зале пела Параша для государя, и он пожаловал ей за ее пение какие-то неслыханные жемчуга. Автор прожил в этом доме 35 лет и все про него знает. Он думает, 5 января. 41 г., что самое главное еще впереди.

January 5, 1941. The Fontanka House ... Under Swedish rule there was a country house here ... When Parasha Zhemchugova was in the pangs of childbirth, stands for the wedding guests [galleries] were built for the upcoming celebration of her wedding. As is well known, Parasha died in childbirth, and a completely different rite [of a different type] was held. Next to the author's rooms is the celebrated "White Hall," the work of Quarenghi, where Pavel I used to hide behind the mirrors and eavesdrop on what the Sheremetevs' ball guests were saying about him. In this hall Parasha sang for the sovereign, and to reward her singing he bestowed upon her a fantastic pearl. The author lived in this house for 35 years and knows everything about it. She thinks, on Jan. 5, 1941, that the most important thing is still ahead.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 39

²⁴ Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, *Zapisnye knizhki Anny Akhmatovoi (1958-1966)* (Moscow: Rossiysky gosudarstvennyy arkhiv literatury i iskusstva, 1996), 551. Translated by Nancy Anderson in Anna Andreevna Akhmatova and Nancy K. Anderson, *The Word That Causes Death's Defeat: Poems of Memory*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 257.

Nearly every detail in this account is ahistorical but it demonstrates how strongly the Fountain House and its former inhabitants resonated with Akhmatova. "Parasha" also appears in a stanza cut from the final version of "Poem Without a Hero":

Что бормочешь ты, полночь наша,
Все равно умерла Параша,
Молодая хозяйка дворца.
Не достроена галерея —
Это свадебная затея,
Где опять под подсказку Борея
[Вот все] Это все я для вас пишу.
Тянет ладаном из всех окон,
Срезан самый любимый локон,
И темнеет овал лица.

Midnight, what are you muttering there?
Parasha died, still young and fair,
Rightful lady of palace halls.
The gallery that should have been filled
With wedding guests was left half-built —
There, as Boreas prompts, blowing chill,
[Here's what] I'm writing all of this down for you.
From every window incense drifts,
A lock of the beloved hair is snipped
And on the oval face darkness falls.²⁵

Nancy Anderson identifies this spectral appearance of Parasha as a counterpoint to "the guest from the future," who appears in the same hall in the finished poem.²⁶ The guest from the future is a figure associated with Isaiah Berlin, whom Akhmatova met in 1945, and who comes as a harbinger of the Cold War: "But what we together will bring about / Will trouble the Twentieth Century ... It's doom he'll come bearing me that night."²⁷ The

²⁵ Akhmatova, 470. Translated by Nancy Anderson in Akhmatova and Anderson, 257-258.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

two ghostly figures in the Sheremetevs' hall represent the suffering of the past and of the future, converging during Akhmatova's residency in the palace during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and the siege of the 1940s.

"On the oval face darkness falls" is a visually evocative line and one that I believe indicates Akhmatova's familiarity with Nikolai Argunov's posthumous portrait. The "coffin" painting of Praskovia Sheremeteva was located in the Fountain House during the early period of Akhmatova's residence there.²⁸ Until 1927, the main wing of the palace contained a "Museum of Everyday Life" that featured art and objects from the Sheremetevs (from 1927 onward, the exhibit changed to a theme of "Peasant Labor and Daily Life in the 18th and 19th Centuries").²⁹ A 1923 catalog lists the Nikolai Argunov portrait alongside paintings of Nikolai and Praskovia Sheremeteva, Tatiana Shlykova, and various other family members.³⁰ The unusual portrait, which had been venerated by generations of Sheremetev descendants, also appears to have made a strong impression on Akhmatova. Argunov had painted a woman who had embodied multiple identities, from noblewoman to serf to Samnite warrior, and who in this painting was in the liminal moment between her life and her death. Akhmatova responded to and exaggerated the dual qualities of Sheremeteva's life — the wedding preparations turned into a funeral, childbirth leading to death — in her notes for "Poem Without a Hero" and returned to

²⁸ It was moved to Ostankino in 1930 and is still there today. See Varvara Rakina, *Zhivopisets Nikolai Argunov* (Moskva: Trilistnik, 2004), 150.

²⁹ Popova and Rubinchik, 27.

³⁰ Vladimir Konstanovich Staniukovich, *Fontannyi dom Sheremetevykh: Musei byta. Putovoditel, sostavlennyyi khranitel'nyam muzeia V. K. Stanyukovichem* (Petrograd: Izdatel'stvo Brokgauz-Efron 1923), 27-28, 31.

them in the deleted stanza. Like Argunov, she was immersed for a long time in the Sheremetevs' household (albeit after their decline), and appears to have drawn from her surroundings personal allusions that she seeded throughout her poetry.

Akhmatova claimed, probably with some irony, to know everything about the Sheremetev household. I cannot come close to doing the same. There is a vast amount of archival material relating to the Sheremetevs that might one day yield new insights about the Argunovs' working conditions, their education and role in the training of others, the identity of their unknown sitters, and even, perhaps, some piece of writing by Ivan or Nikolai that conveys something of how they perceived themselves as elite serf painters. But it is unlikely that every question raised by the Argunovs' work will be answered. Their paintings express some of the complexities that were rarely expressed in words. In fact, it is the obtuse visual strategies, the odd points of reference, the overall strangeness of their portraits of serfs that are most significant. All of these show how difficult it was to reconcile the social realities of servitude with the conventions of Enlightenment portraiture; they show how much effort it required to enmesh a person in the household power structure without extinguishing their individuality, their liveliness, or something of their character. Because what Roche calls "individual logic" still comes through in these paintings, from Ivan Argunov's subtle self-portraiture to Tatiana Shlykova's direct gaze. The manumission of surviving elite serfs by 1816 demonstrates that the collision of serfdom and art-making was socially unsustainable, but it was the Argunovs' portraits that show how a person could be implicated in a terrible social hierarchy but still retain individuality, subjectivity, secrets, ambitions, desires, mixed loyalties, and pride. In other

words, they disclose the inherent foolishness, as the anonymous poet "P" would have it, of trying to own a human being.

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