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FEATURES

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The Petersburg Principle

Review: "What's Become of Peter's Dream?"

BY PETER KURTH



FABERGE PICTURE FRAME, 1910
"What Became of Peter's Dream? Petersburg in History and the Arts," and **"City of Shadows,"** photographs by **Alexey Titarenko. Middlebury College Museum of Art. Through December 7.**

"What Became of Peter's Dream?" is the beguiling but ultimately unanswerable question posed by the exhibit recently opened at Middlebury College Center for the Arts. The rest of its title is "Petersburg in History and the Arts," and it is part of the larger, semester-long Clifford Symposium commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Russian city of St. Petersburg.

The event kicked off on September 18 with a series of lectures, panel discussions, a concert of Russian music featuring cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, and a screening of Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*. Shot entirely in the Hermitage Museum, the new film provides a 90-minute glimpse of Russian history in one astonishing, uninterrupted take.

Since 1993, the Clifford Symposium, named for retired history professor Nicholas R. Clifford, has traditionally opened Middlebury's academic year by selecting a single historical topic "that can be approached from the perspective of a number of disciplines:" visual, documentary, theoretical and so on. In the case of St. Petersburg — called Leningrad by the Soviets and, briefly, Petrograd by the tsars — you need to add music, theater, dance and the fine arts. Not to mention "murders and adultery, blood and mud, the block, the rope and poison," what the last French ambassador to tsarist Russia called "the true emblems of Russian autocracy."



A PHOTO BY ALEXEY TITARENKO

“When speaking about Russia,” said the philosopher Chaadayev, Pushkin’s teacher and a man declared insane by the tsarist regime for asking too many questions, “people always assume that they are speaking of a state which is similar to others. In actual fact this is not true at all,” he continued. “Russia is an entirely special world, obedient to the will, arbitrariness and fantasy of one man. Whether he be called Peter or Ivan is of no import: In all cases it is the same — arbitrary rule personified.”

Chaadayev wrote these words in 1836, some time after

Petersburg’s first centenary and

four generations after Peter the Great first opened his “Window on the West.” It was artificial, *sui generis*, willed to exist on a fummy, fetid, mosquito-ridden swamp where the Neva River meets the Gulf of Finland. No one had ever thought of putting down roots until Peter said they had to.

The tsar needed a port for his expanding trade with Europe and as a defense in Russia’s Great Northern War with the Swedes; the first stone of what is now the Peter and Paul Fortress was laid on May 16, 1703, and within a decade St. Petersburg was born. “Sankt Pieter Burkh,” as it was first called, was a tribute both to Peter’s patron saint and to the Dutch seafarers and shipbuilders whose industry he so greatly admired.

“St. Petersburg is a Russian pyramid,” said the poet Yevtushenko, by which he meant that it was built on the backs of slaves and that none of the materials required for its construction are found anywhere in the natural environs of the city. The story is told of workers from the countryside bearing loads of dirt on their pummeled backs and then being buried in the ground they carried when at length they died from exhaustion.

Tens of thousands of people, possibly hundreds of thousands, are supposed to have perished during the raising of the city. Floods and fires were an everyday menace, and if you weren’t carried off by scurvy or malaria, there were wolves in the streets to make you wish you’d stayed in Moscow.

So many people died to give Peter his city — the “Venice of the North” it’s also called, as well as “Northern Palmyra” and “Babylon of the Snows” — that St. Petersburg is still referred to among Russians as a city “built on bones.” The tsarist capital was founded “in principle,” said Dostoyevsky, “in contrast with Moscow and its entire concept,” and the important thing to remember about the “Window” idea is that it looked in only one direction — out.

Petersburg was the face, the mind, the brain and the style of the Russian empire, until the Soviets, during the civil war in 1918, moved the capital back to Moscow and banished “Leningrad” to an incongruous, Vienna-like existence on the fringes of national life. Like Austria after the fall of the Hapsburgs, Peter’s creation was suddenly irrelevant, all head and no rump, a “City of

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Palaces” with nothing to rule.

The exhibit now on display at Middlebury glitters and flashes quiet lights of fire under the expert hands of museum designer Kenneth Pohlman and Anne Odom, curator *emerita* of the Hillwood Museum in Washington, D.C. It focuses on the celebration of the city’s second hundred years in 1903 — the last, peaceful years of its history under the reign of Nicholas II, before “Bloody Sunday,” the First World War and the Bolshevik takeover of 1917. Included are paintings, drawings, photographs, portraits, ceremonial and religious objects and “luxurious household items,” as the catalogue states, some of them designed by Fabergé and once belonging to the Russian imperial family.

These items have come to Middle-bury from two sources. The Hillwood Museum is the former home of cereal heiress Marjorie Merriwether Post — yes, as in Post Toasties — which today houses the largest collection of 18th- and 19th-century Russian imperial art outside of Russia. Among Post’s many marriages was one to Joseph E. Davies, an early ambassador to Soviet Russia from the United States and the author of *Mission to Moscow*.

In the early Soviet years, Russian imperial treasures were selling for a song; after her residence there, Post never ceased to add to her collection. As Odom remarks in her catalog notes, “Despite the decline of its power [in the 20th century], the artistic legacy of the tsar’s court was significant and is still wildly popular” — an understatement, given the current passion (and staggeringly high prices) for anything related to the Russia of the tsars.

But Middlebury has its own collection of Romanov memorabilia, some gifted and some on loan, that once formed part of the family treasure of the Russian Grand Duke George Mikhailovitch and his wife, Grand Duchess Marie, a daughter of the king of Greece. Both were cousins of Nicholas II. Grand Duke George was shot by the Bolsheviks in 1919, while Marie escaped to England with their two daughters, Nina and Xenia.

It was Xenia’s daughter, Woodstock resident Nancy Leeds Wynkoop, and her husband, Edward, who in 1994 presented Middlebury College with many of the Romanov artifacts now on display. These include formal and informal portraits of the imperial family, a bowl made of bowenite, silver gilt and rubies, ivory frames from the House of Fabergé, gold and silver serving utensils, vases from St. Petersburg’s Imperial Porcelain Factory, tumblers from the royal yachts — all things that used to sit rather casually in the Wynkoops’ Woodstock houses and which would have been found in any Romanov household at the time of the Revolution.

Indeed, what Nancy Wynkoop has called her “beloved treasures,” “most of them small and suitable for sitting out on bureaus, tabletops and desks,” were given by one Romanov to another on birthdays, holidays, anniversaries and so forth. They provide the most compelling sense of what life at the Russian court was actually like in those twilight years — more so than the larger pieces and works of art on display. Among the latter are drawings and paintings by Valentin Serov and Leon Bakst, leaders of Diaghilev’s “World of Art” movement at the turn of the 20th century (with Diaghilev, Bakst was also a founder of the Ballets Russes).

The “private” pieces are more telling because they give a sense of real people, trapped in a cataclysmic upheaval and forced out of Russia more or less in their nightgowns. And because nothing but a trip to St. Petersburg can give you

an idea of the vastness of the place, its sheer size and scale, and its utter incongruity in the middle of the Neva swamp.

“Petersburg streets possess one indubitable quality,” wrote Andrei Bely in his Symbolist epic, *Petersburg* (1914), still the most reliable guide to the secret heart of the city: “They transform passersby into shadows.”

Helpfully, in this regard, a second exhibit gives a taste, at least, of what Bely meant. Next to the exquisite imperial geegaws, soup spoons and whatnots — and actually entitled “City of Shadows” — are photographs of contemporary St. Petersburg by Alexey Titarenko, a native who’s been photographing the city since his early teens.

“Profoundly influenced by Dostoyevsky,” Titarenko continues in the tradition of Russian modernism with pictures, as he says, that express “his own emotions.” The curators add darkly that this was “a calculated risk during the Soviet era of Titarenko’s youth,” and of course it was. But the results are thrilling — haunting, dreamlike, sad and yet still hopeful, as Petersburg now slowly emerges from the Soviet nightmare and begins its long journey of reconstruction.



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