

Priscilla Carrasco. Praise Old Believers. Portland, OR: Burdock/Burn Art Resource, Inc., 2003. Limited edition of 250 copies. Black/White and Color Photographs. 335 pages. \$100.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-9720964-1-8.

Praise Old Believers is aptly named. A coffee-table sized volume with excellent photographic reproduction and art-book design, it weaves together text and photographs (some in color) of Old Believers in Oregon and Alaska from 1966-1987. Throughout, Praise Old Believers takes a loving and largely uncritical look at the families who moved to the USA in the mid-1960s, bringing with them an Old Believer folk tradition that had found its way through Russia, Ukraine, China, Romania, Turkey, and Brazil before settling in Woodburn, OR and Nikolaevsk, Alaska.

Praise Old Believers has a rather elegiac feeling. It is a respectful depiction of Old Believer life as the author saw it, representations of tradition in the midst of rapid change. No less importantly, the book chronicles a way of viewing the Old Believers. I began researching Old Believers during the period when some photos for this book were taken, also traveling to Oregon and Alaska in the mid 1980s. Somehow, the Old Believers conjured a yearning for a past that did not exist in America, stirring up an awe for people who had withstood travel around the globe in order to fulfill their lives according to Old Believer custom and faith. To my mind, a sense of quiet sadness permeates Priscilla Carrasco's work, even when describing the joyful wedding celebrations that take up a large section of the book. For many scholars and observers of Old Believer communities, this sadness—for a culture long-tended but soon to be lost to American life—plays a remarkable role in coloring our scholarly perceptions of time, place, and custom.

The book focuses on three Old Believer groups that moved to America in the early-mid 1960s. Each of these communities had traveled thousands of miles. Two of them—the Harbintsy and Sintsianty—came from China. Their stories, told in anecdotal form throughout the book, are harrowing tales of flight from Soviet and Communist Chinese authorities. Their folk life was made unique by their environment—not only did they live in mainland China, but they also spent time in Hong Kong, Brazil, and New Jersey on their way to permanent homes in Oregon and Alaska. The Turchani, products of Nekrasov and Kuban Old Believers who had moved to Turkey, joined the two “Chinese” groups in the United States. (There had been an earlier Old Believer migration to the USA in the early twentieth century but there was little interaction between them and the newcomers.) From a folklore perspective, these groups are fascinating—coming from a shared religious and cultural tradition, they were forced together after long and harrowing separate journeys. Yet all three maintained folk traditions as a crucial part of their identity.

The book is devoted to photographs of Old Believers in their homes, at work, and during important ritual occasions. Nearly all the pictures are of women and children, with a few younger men and a smattering of old men. Most pictures are of-the-moment, chronicling a particular movement or interaction between mother and child, siblings, or friends. In the posed pictures (like the portrait on the book's cover), Old Believer subjects gaze directly at the lens. This produces a frank and guileless portrait. Place, subject, and date accompany the photographs, making them useful for comparative studies.

On facing pages, Carrasco has written accompanying text, more evocative than scholarly. Interestingly, she tends toward poetic language in her own narrative. Thus, on page eighty-two she writes “They are married in the church before dawn, / the angels are here to listen.” When, however, she reports on Old Believer descriptions of their own lives, Carrasco leans toward traditional prose. Here is a description of Old Believers in China: “I was eleven years old,” said Agafia, ‘before I ever saw the city. I had heard about it, but I did not know what it was. Once a truck came to our village. Everyone came out to see it... and to follow it. The man, the driver, spoke Russian. He took us for a ride. We rode in the back of it. This was the first time I ever saw a truck” [193].

If domestic life and weddings are leitmotifs for the book, they are woven together by Carrasco’s fascination with Old Believer embroidery, which she has carefully reproduced. In fact, the eight color photographs in the book show particularly important examples: on page 148, for instance, is a color detail photograph of needlework from Sinkiang province about 1920. Carrasco takes care to let the women embroiderers describe their craft. Not only does the text describe the changes in embroidery style and material, but each picture also has provenance information. These are sensitively made and carefully selected photographs, meant to show the transformation of traditional craft across time and geography.

The book is completed by brief but thoughtful additions—a preface by Robert Whitmore and a short history of the Old Belief by Margaret McKibben. These, along with a glossary of terms used in the book, help turn this handsome art volume into a useful scholarly tool.

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