

Patty Wageman, (et al. ed.). *Russian Legends. Folk Tales and Fairy Tales*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Groninger Museum, NAI Publishers, 2007. \$49.95 (paper). 215 pp. Catalogue. Summaries of fairy tales and byliny. List of works in the exhibition. Photo credits. Credits. ISBN 978-90-5662-608-2.

This lavish edition appeared on the occasion of the exhibition “Russian Legends, Folk Tales and Fairy Tales” at the Groninger Museum, in the Netherlands, held from December 15, 2007 to April 6, 2008. The exhibit was an unprecedented thematic exposition of the art works of the foremost Russian artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Viktor Vasnetsov, Ivan Bilibin, Elena Polenova, Mikhail Vrubel’, Nikolai Roerikh, and Vasily Kandinsky. The common theme was the artists’ interest in modern representations of Russian folk legends and folktales in art. The book contains a collection of articles that discuss the artwork of the aforementioned artists. The second half of the book is the exhibition catalogue. The edition also presents summaries of the most popular Russian folktales and *byliny*, which provide a good explanatory basis for interpreting the images given in the catalogue and help to connect the visual representations with folkloric narratives. This beautiful publication boasts a superior quality of reproductions and paper and creates a perfect visual encyclopaedia of the Russian art of Modernity and Modernism that was inspired by the Slavic revival triggered during the reign of Alexander III and the subsequent flourishing of the style *Russe* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In his foreword the director of the Groninger Museum, Keen van Twist, points out that this exhibition is a first. It is important, he states, because all the works presented are emblematic of their style. Thus Viktor Vasnetsov’s artworks presented in the catalogue are “icons of nineteenth-century Russian painting” (8) and Elena Polenova and Ivan Bilibin are important because they created the new imaginary realm of Russian history and folklore. Similarly, Nikolai Roerikh and Vasily Kandinsky represent the expressionist treatment of folkloric images.

The first article of the collection is “Cinderella without her Glass Slipper; Snow White without her Dwarves” by Sijbolt Noorda. It is an attempt to parallel Russian and Western fairytales. The author states that, while folk stories are now usually told to children, in fact they are about real life. The author compares the beautiful Vasilisa from the Russian folktale to Cinderella (13-15) and Snow White to the heroine of “The Tale of Dead Tsarevna and Seven *Bogatyr*s”, the story retold by Nienke

van Hichtum and known in the Netherlands as fairytale “Olechka” (15-16). He looks for the allusions between these different stories that were produced by European and Russian folk cultures. The second essay in the book is Patty Wageman’s “Once upon a Time... Words into Pictures”. It discusses the history of *skazki* and *byliny*’s transformation from an oral tradition into an illustrative narrative in *lubki* (pl., *lubok* – sing.). The author describes examples of mythological personages emerging into *lubki* and how *lubki*’s imagery was adopted by the Russian artists V. Vasnetsov, I. Bilibin and N. Roerikh. For example, she focuses on the theme of Sirin and Alkonost, the mythological creatures with female faces and breasts and birds’ bodies. According to Slavic mythology, between the two birds of Paradise, Alkonost personifies the will of God and Paradise, while Sirin is a bird of sorrow. The author explores how these personages are interpreted in both *lubki* and Vasnetsov’s famous paintings (24-25). The author also interprets Russian heroic *byliny* as a metamorphosis of the legend of St. George and the Dragon. The next work, “*Byliny* in Russian art” by Lidia Iovleva, is a survey of the growing attention to folklore that happened during the 19th century. The article is devoted primarily to the various folk motifs in Russian art of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, describing mostly the works of the *Peredvizhniki* and the Abramtsevo artists’ colony. In the context of *byliny*, the author briefly mentions *Sadko* in Il’ia Repin’s artistic rendition. The text speaks little of *byliny*, and it would have been more solid if the author paid more attention to this rich folkloric genre and its versatile visual explorations by Russian artists.

The essay by David Jackson, “Out of Their Minds: The Fantasy Worlds of Viktor Vasnetsov and Ivan Bilibin,” is a detailed approach to the artistic career of these artists. The art historian describes Vasnetsov and Bilibin’s artistic biographies, focusing on the artists’ concerns with folklore in the framework of the history of Russian culture. This work provides a strong contextual analysis of the artworks with folkloric motifs. However, the two artists’ biographies are linked together neither by comparison of artistic means, or approaches to, or interpretations of folklore, nor by any biographical intersections. Perhaps if the article had been divided into two separate essays, each devoted to a single artist, the work would be more meaningful. The article written by Ellen Rutten, “Kashchei the Immortal versus The People: Viktor Vasnetsov and the Political Interpretation of Folk Tales in Russian Culture”, discusses the politicization of Russian folktales in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This quite radical interpretation tells us that the images of princesses and

tsarevnas in Vasnetsov's and other's renditions symbolize Russia, while Kashchei represents the powers of political darkness. To support her claim, the author brings to the readers' attention the images of political caricature from the early 20th century where Russia is personified as a folkloric maiden (presumably, tsarevna). She relates the folklore-inspired art of the early 20th century with the contemporary Russian political interpretation of Vasnetsov's folktale images (57).

Vladimir Kruglov's "Nikolai Roerikh's Byliny and Fairy Tales" is devoted to Roerikh and his art on folkloric themes discussed in a biographical context. The author details the artist's formal language, devoting most of his text to a detailed description of images. The last essay in this collection is the profound and well written art-historical article "Vasily Kandinsky and Folklore: A Journey from Science to Art" by Natasha Kurchanova. The author explores Kandinsky's "folkloric" artworks putting them into the context of the artist's "ethnographic quest". The only artist that is widely represented in the catalogue, but whose folktale illustrations remained unanalysed, is Elena Polenova. An essay devoted to this artist, one of the foremost Russian artists of the Abramtsevo colony, who participated in peasant wood-carving workshops and was interested in folklore and folk art and left a wonderful art heritage, would definitely enrich this collection.

The book is mostly addressed to the general reader and aims to popularize Russian art inspired by folkloric themes. In fact, this is the only thematic compilation of high-quality reproductions of Russian art inspired by folklore. As such, it will definitely find its devotees among the lovers of art and folklore. However, almost all the essays in this collection are written by art historians – one is by a theologian – and no works by folklorists are included. This omission results in a number of regrettable errors. For example, there is a confusion of genres. All the authors tend to confuse fairytales and folktales and to use the two terms interchangeably. "Fairytales" is a term used to refer to literary creations, the immediate source of which is not necessarily oral and folkloric. And fairies never occur as personages of Slavic folklore. All the *skazki* mentioned and summarized in the book are magic tales, a sub-genre of folktales of oral origin. According to Vladimir Propp (see his *Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki*) Russian magic folktales do describe magical events, but they refer to rituals of initiation.

Additionally, due to the exclusion of a specialist in folklore from the production of this book, some articles have disappointing misconceptions that would merely perplex the general (and specialist) reader. For

example, it is hard to agree with the statement that “in the West they [folktales] were primarily intended for children and often contained a moral message” and in Russia the folktales “were told only after the children had gone to sleep” (24), when in both Russia and Europe the original addressees of folktales were mostly adults. As well, it is difficult to accept the identification of the popular personage Yeruslan Lazarevich, whose storyline came to Russian *lubok* books from Middle Asia (see *Lubochnaia kniga / podgotovka teksta, sostavlenie, vstupitel'naia stat'ia, kommentarii* A. Reitblata. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), with Russian *byliny* heroes (27). It is a misinterpretation to assume, based on V. Vasnetsov's *The Sleeping Tsarevna* (52-3), that its plot or the plot of the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* (52) is of Russian folkloric origin. In fact, this narrative came to Russia as the folktale “The Sharp Rose” from the Brothers Grimm's collection. In 1831, during the Romanticist enthusiasm for folklore, it was retold by V.A. Zhukovskii in verse form, recontextualizing the European folkloric plot into a traditional Russian setting.

Another weakness of this edition are the numerous misprints and misleading details. For example, the 9th endnote to the essay by Sijbolt Noorda (16-17) does not appear on the page and the reader remains uninformed about the quoted source written by Regina Bendix. The editing/transliteration of the collection also required more attention. For example, Donetsk appears as “Donets” (41), the name of Viktor Zhirmunsky – as Zhimunsky (64), etc. Moreover, the reader seeking further scholarly detail would not likely be satisfied by references to Wikipedia that lurk in the endnotes (14; endnote 4).

Placing these unfortunate misprints and errors aside, this is a marvellous thematic compilation of artwork and it will undoubtedly find its admirers who would celebrate the appearance of a wonderful source of Russian visual culture inspired by folktales and folk epics. By connecting the reader to traditional Russian folklore, via the paintings and graphic art of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this publication opens new horizons for the interpretation of Russian art of Modernity and Modernism.

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