Editor's Preface: What Has Been Done?

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann

What Is to Be Done? [*Chto delat'?*] – The question, originating from the eponymous novel (1863) by Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89), echoes in late Imperial and Soviet Russia.[1] The novel encouraged various authors to react to its revolutionary ideas, from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Vladimir Nabokov, from Leo Tolstoy to Vladimir Lenin.[2] Chernyshevsky's ideas also included his interpretation of art as a means to educate the common people and expand human knowledge.[3] Art and those creating it were in the middle of the debates on its purpose and socio-political use. It is no wonder that artists engaged with their environment and were eager to add to society by broadening the horizon of the many instead of the few. From the *Peredvizhniki* [Wanderers], an artists' association that exhibited their members' artworks not only in the metropolises but also outside of these,[4] to the Soviet museum employees who integrated their political ideas in the presentation of artworks, art was a tool to express self-perception and one's own interpretation of

[1] Nikolai Chernychevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, ed. Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[2] Fedor Dostoevskii (1821–81) wrote his novella *Notes from Underground* [*Zapiski iz podpol'ia*] (1864) as a mocking reaction to Chernyshevskii's work. Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), known by the pen name Vladimir Sirin, was similarly critical in his last novel in Russian, *The Gift* [*Dar*] (1872). Lev Tolstoi (1828–1910) wrote about his own ideas of moral responsibility in *What Then Must We Do?* [*Tak chto zhe nam delat'?*] (1884–86), and Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) openly demonstrated his enthusiasm by naming his revolutionary political pamphlet *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* [*Cho delat'? Nabolevshie voprosy nashego dvizheniia*] (1902). For more on the reception of Chernyshevskii's text, see Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner, "Introduction: Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* and the Russian Intelligentsia," in Chernychevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, 1–36.

[3] Chernyshevskii, as well as other thinkers of his time, used the term "art" [*iskusstvo*] as an umbrella term for all creative art forms, such as literature, fine arts, and music.

[4] The Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions [*Tovarichshestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok*], better known as the *Peredvizhniki*, aimed to broaden their outreach by means of exhibitions in towns and cities outside the major metropolitan areas. Nonetheless, they still mainly exhibited in St. Petersburg and Moscow. For more on the *Peredvizhniki* in the context of St. Petersburg exhibition practices, see Marat Ismagilov's essay "Make Academic Art Great Again: Exhibitions of the Society of Art Exhibitions in the St. Petersburg Press from 1876 to 1883" in this volume.

society with the desire to make a difference.[5] The exhibition practice, sometimes artistic in itself, was preceded by artistic creation, which in turn was accompanied by theoretical discourse. The latter was by no means dominated by theorists but included artists and their opinion on how, why, and for whom art should be made. The present volume presents new research on how art making, criticism, and promotion responded dynamically to the fast-moving social, cultural, and political contexts of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

This volume is divided into three sections: "art practice," "theory" and "promotion." Many themes recur and complement each other as those three areas have always been intertwined. The essays in the first section focus on individual artistic approaches and on how artists reacted to their social, historical, and artistic environment. Trenton Olsen examines the critical reception of Ivan Kramskoi's painting *Unknown Woman* (1883), highlighting its reflection of Russian societal ambivalence towards modernity. He elaborates how the reaction to this painting embodies the tension between Russia's industrial ambitions and its reluctance to embrace western influences, particularly in the context of prostitution and sexual independence. With a focus on Viktor Vasnetsov, Ludmila Piters-Hofmann explores the use of Church Slavonic typefaces in late-imperial Russian art and how written content was used to mimic authentic cultural heritage. In her case studies, she demonstrates the different purposes pursued by integrating text into diverse artworks and how this broadened the perception of Church Slavonic, while reflecting the search for cultural authenticity in the Russian Empire. Tatiana Levina reflects upon the philosophical understanding of the icon and the impact of the rediscovery of old-style icons through exhibitions in the early twentieth century. She explores the influence of asceticism from old-style Russian icons on avant-garde artists, in particular, Kazimir Malevich,[6] arguing that the avant-garde's minimalist aesthetics were informed by religious philosophies, and challenging the perception of these artists as purely iconoclastic and highlighting their connection to traditional spiritual practices.

In the second section on theory, the vivid theoretical debates of the times are examined taking into account the perspective of leading figures and group dynamics within artists' societies. Maria Taroutina presents a new perspective on the circular art historical narratives of Nikolai Punin and Nikolai Tarabukin,

[5] For more insights on Soviet museum practice, see Rahma Khazam's essay "From the Marxist Display to Sots Art: Museum Exhibitions of Soviet-Era Art and the east-west Divide" in this volume.

[6] Kazimir Malevich [Polish: Kazimierz Malewicz; Ukrainian transliteration: Kasymyr Malevych] was born in Kyiv, present-day Ukraine, to Polish parents who were deported there from Congress Poland (1815–1915) after the January Uprising of 1863–-64.

who were known for their modernist views, but also advocated for a return to medieval and Russo-Byzantine traditions. Taroutina challenges the dichotomy between traditional and avant-garde art with her analysis on how both theorists revealed a complex relationship between historical and modernist narratives in Russian art. Sebastian Borkhardt's case study of Wassily Kandinsky's essay "Abstract Art" positions the artist's ideas in the context of the east-west dichotomy of the contemporary discourse. Focusing on the role of the "Slavic principle" in Kandinsky's abstract painting, Borkhardt addresses the problematic essentialism in the artist's binary opposition between east and west, reflecting broader cultural debates on Russian identity and abstraction. With her analysis of as yet unpublished documents, Vera Otdelnova sheds light on the institutional point of view and on how the Moscow Union of Artists examined their own art theory and their unique relationship to realism and modernism during the 1960s. She reveals the complexity of Soviet artists' engagement with western modernism and their struggle to reconcile traditional and innovative artistic values.

In-depth analyses of how artworks were presented in exhibitions by institutions, in printed media, and through other displays such as theater and ballet and the dynamic discussions that unfolded around them are the focus of the last section on promotion. Marat Ismagilov investigates the reception of the exhibitions of the Society of Art Exhibitions in St. Petersburg, challenging their negative portrayal by left-wing critics. With various examples of contemporary reflection in the press, he demonstrates that these exhibitions were seen as inclusive and diverse by moderate critics, representing a broader spectrum of nineteenth-century Russian art. Louise Hardiman sheds light on the less official position, exploring Sergei Diaghilev's promotion of neo-national art, emphasizing his reliance on traditional Russian folk art despite his modernist reputation. She reexamines the enmity between Diaghilev and Vladimir Stasov and highlights the conjunction of Diaghilev's work and the neo-nationalist ideas of his predecessors, showing how he adapted these influences for a global audience. The official state perspective on art promotion in Soviet times is interrogated by Rahma Khazam. She examines the different approaches taken to the display of artworks in museum exhibitions, from the Marxist interpretation to the impact of Sots Art, highlighting the evolving presentation of Soviet art in relation to western practices. She discusses the effect of the Cold War on these exhibitions and their role in shaping perceptions of Soviet art.

The volume's epilogue takes a step outside the examined period. The contemporary Russian émigré artist Pavel Otdelnov shares his thoughts on his own identity as an artist and how it is reflected in his work. He describes his perspective on the intricate relationship between Soviet history and contemporary Russian society through his multifaceted art projects. The exploration of themes such as urban space, environmental impact, and historical memory shaped his art and Russia's

war of aggression against Ukraine transformed it. With his perspective—that of an artist in challenging times—Otdelnov offers the kind of first-hand insight that art historians seek to rediscover.

The nine academic essays contained in this volume present several aspects of the multifarious scholarship on art and culture in late Imperial and Soviet Russia. Yet, a broad question like *What is to be done?* cannot be conclusively answered. In response to the process of decolonization in scholarship, we, the authors, have begun to recast and reframe our work. We took a first step to reevaluate and to challenge the established Russo-centric narrative. For example, providing additional information and context in the footnotes is one of the methods we have adopted in order to broaden perspectives on the diversity of the imperial experience. The present volume aims to make a valuable addition to the ongoing academic discourse, and to supply the reader with useful information on specific cases and inspiration for further research. In the words of Pavel Otdelnov, we "believe it is essential to explore the history, and the past of [Russia] honestly, carefully and in a clear-eyed way, especially now, when [we are] standing at this critical juncture."

Art Practice

Ivan Kramskoi's *Unknown Woman* and the Embarrassment of Modernity

Trenton Olsen

If one were to imagine one of the defining images of European modernity, the following image might materialize: a woman lounging in a recumbent pose surrounded by a plush interior, various fabrics sensually brushing against her skin and black silk tied in a bow hanging from her neck. Golden bracelets encircle her wrists, adding a discrete sense of wealth and finery to her accoutrements. The woman is consciously on display, rendered in a manner that pulls the viewer's attention to her body at the center of the canvas, while the contours of her figure are emphasized by the contrasting colors of her surroundings. Most strikingly, although her position seems to invite a level of visual consumption, her gaze confronts the viewer's in a bold, direct manner. She acknowledges the proximity of an unseen male figure, and by extension an implied male viewing audience, but she firmly asserts control over the situation rather than passively giving herself over to the erotic consumption of the male gaze. For an art historian familiar with the western tradition, these details might conjure up Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). It is less likely that the image of European modernity to come to mind for the art historian would be a work painted twenty years later by Russian artist Ivan Kramskoi (1837—87), simply referred to as *Neizvestnaia*, or *Unknown Woman* (1883, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) (fig. 1.1).

This title, *Neizvestnaia*, casts a cloak of ambiguity around an image painted with stunning clarity. Indeed, even the genre of the painting itself seemed to evade critics who could not discern whether or not the image was a portrait.[1] Although the painting has garnered some scholarly attention, it remains relatively understudied in the broader context of art historical research.[2] One of

[1] To date, scholars have been unable to find a satisfactory identity for the model in *Unknown Woman*.

[2] The most recent and compelling research discussing *Unknown Woman* is offered by Allison Leigh, in which she relates Kramskoi's sense of desperation to provide for his family around the time that he completed the work. She proposes that Kramskoi's circumstances caused him to relate to the commodity culture and exchange of sex work alluded to in *Unknown Woman*. See Allison Leigh, *Picturing Russia's Men*: *Masculinity and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 206–12. For further scholarly accounts of the painting,

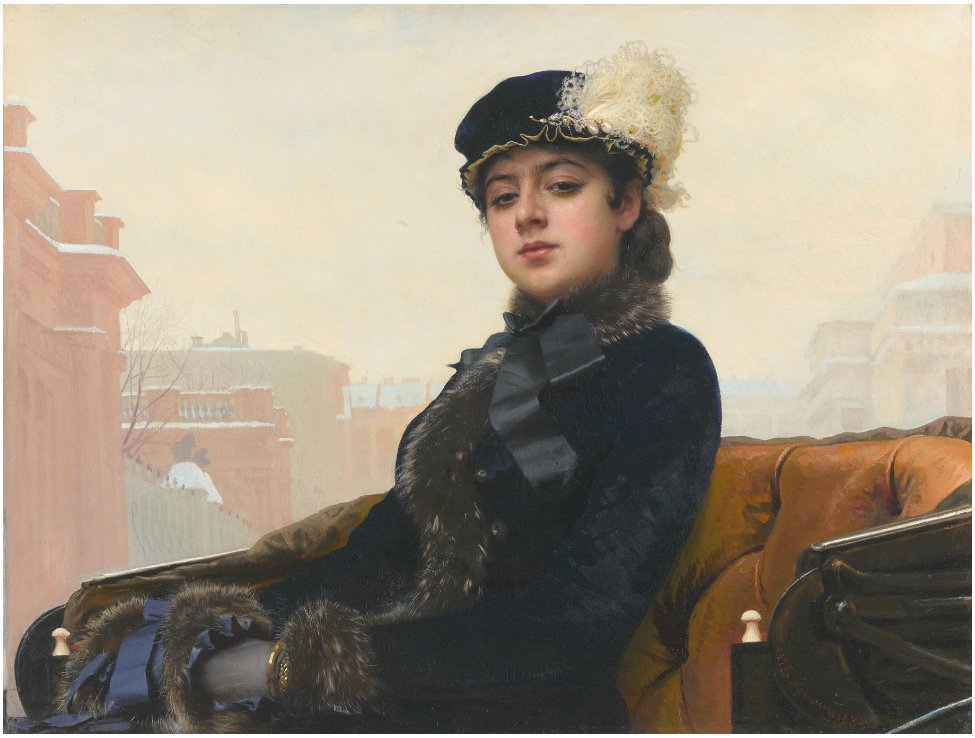

Figure 1.1: Ivan Kramskoi, *Unknown Woman*, 1883, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

a few authoritative and cumulative sources on the painting is offered by the Tretyakov Gallery.[3] In its description of *Unknown Woman* the museum points to her modern western attire as evidence of her position within the demi-monde. The author references a few segments of criticism written in 1883, reviewing the eleventh *Peredvizhniki* [Wanderers] exhibition, which imply that the woman was a courtesan. While a few passages of the work's critical reception have become more standard in discussion surrounding *Unknown Woman*, in this essay,

see: Sof'ia N. Gol'dshtein, *Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi: Zhisn' i tvorchestvo. 1837–1887* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), 220–25; Nina F. Lapunova, *Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 88–90; Tat'iana I. Kurochkina, *Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi, 1837–1887* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1989), 80–90; Tat'iana S. Karpova, *Ivan Kramskoi* (Moscow: Belyi gorod, 2000), 46–51; *Russia! Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, Las Vegas* (exh. cat.), ed. Elizabeth Franzen et al. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2005), 28; and David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 95.

[3] See [n.a.], "Ivan Kramskoy (1837–1887), Unknown Woman (1883)," https://my.tretyakov.ru/app/masterpiece/8396?lang=en [accessed August 21, 2024].

I will provide a more sustained investigation of the original critical reception for this work to contend that this discourse exposes and betrays anxiety about the woman's implicit acknowledgement and confident control over her sexuality. Without straightforwardly implicating the woman as a prostitute or courtesan, contemporary critics demonstrate concern over the ambiguity that surrounds her status. These fears are indicative of larger worries or what I will categorize as an embarrassment of modernity in Russia in the late nineteenth century.

After Ivan Kramskoi's death in April 1887, a posthumous retrospective was held in his honor, in which *Unknown Woman* was exhibited. Pavel Mikhailovich Kovalevsky (1823–1907), a well-established historian, critic, and close contemporary of Kramskoi's wrote the following about the painting:

> Kramskoi's portraits are considered by many to be accusatory. However, it is not the artist that denounces [society], but rather society that condemns itself under the veracity of his brush [...]. [This] provocatively beautiful woman, dressed in expensive furs and velvet, casts upon you a contemptuous glance from a luxurious carriage—is this not one of the spawn of big cities that release contemptible women onto the street dressed in outfits purchased for the price of female chastity? And if they allow themselves to look on society with contempt, then it is society itself which is guilty.[4]

Of all the reviews written regarding *Unknown Woman*, Kovalevsky's label "the spawn of big cities" is the most straightforward assertion of the woman's involvement in commercialized sex. However, he does not blame the woman for her prostitution in exchange for luxurious attire, pointing out that society itself is at fault. And society is made to feel that castigation by the woman's piercing gaze. Kovalevsky's review sets the stage for an unease that hung in the air of Russian society over the modern developments occurring in its big cities.

Art historical inquiry into modernity and spectacular society has explored France and Paris to a far greater extent than Russia and St. Petersburg. The scholarship that introduced the spectacle of modernity into art history and helped solidify contemporary conception of Manet's *Olympia* as one of the quintessential images of modernity was of course Timothy J. Clark's landmark work *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers.*[5] However, Russia likewise underwent concurrent developments in urbanization and industrialization that restructured society over the course of the century. Alongside these developments a nationalistic struggle for Russia came to determine its identity vis à vis its

[4] The full text of the quote can be found in Gol'dshtein, *Kramskoi*, 220.

[5] See Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*: *Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

western neighbors. The Russian Empire emerged as one of the four Great Powers following the Napoleonic Wars (1804–15), and while the empire represented a significant military power, it was also made aware and deeply self-conscious of its technological and industrial disadvantages during the Crimean War (1853–56) and the *Great Exhibition* held in London in 1851, deficits which the government struggled to overcome.[6] Coinciding with the emancipation of Russia's serfs in 1861 was the interconnection of the empire's major cities and provinces through the expansion of the railroad. As industrialization increased, so did the need for workers and, as a result, thousands of laborers were drawn to urban centers for factory work.[7] Despite laws that bound emancipated serfs to the land they had previously cultivated for landowners, there was a colossal working-class migration from the rural country to urban centers, principally Moscow and St. Petersburg. From 1856 to 1897, the urban population of Russian cities more than doubled, from 5.2 million to 12.2 million.[8]

Part of this migration was comprised of women who moved from villages to large cities and took jobs as seamstresses, service personnel, and servants.[9] Unsurprisingly, this fostered a rapid growth in sex work as women were forced to find means to supplement their insufficient income due to insurmountable inequalities or exploitative circumstances built into the emerging capitalist and industrial systems.[10] It seems that one common element of modernity across Europe was the practice of commercialized sex partnered with a policing of women's sexuality.[11] Although working-class women who came to the major cities of the empire from the provinces faced equally difficult working and living conditions, they enjoyed a new kind of independence from patriarchal familial systems. Historian Barbara Alpern Engel writes, "The growth of prostitution was the most visible and troubling symbol of women's freedom from patriarchal control and it moved the

[6] Louise McReynolds and Cathy Popkin, "The Objective Eye and the Common Good," in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution, 1881–1940*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83; Anthony Swift, "Russia and the Great Exhibition of 1851: Representations, Perceptions, and a Missed Opportunity," *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas* 55, no. 2 (2007): 242–63.

[7] Barbara Alpern Engel, "Transformation versus Tradition," in *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine Worobec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 139.

[8] Steve Smith and Catriona Kelly, "Commercial Culture and Consumerism," in Kelly and Shepherd, *Constructing Russian Culture*, 107.

[9] Richard Stites, "Prostitute and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Russia," *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas* 31, no. 3 (1983): 348.

[10] Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 4.

[11] Alpern Engel, "Transformation versus Tradition," 142.

state to action."[12] This action came in the form of state regulation of prostitution. In 1843, the minister of internal affairs under Emperor Nicholas I (1796–1855, r. 1825–55) instigated a system of regulation under the auspices of the police and medical community by which all prostitutes were to be registered with the police and issued an official document, otherwise known as the "yellow ticket" [*zheltyi bilet*].[13] Through regulation, the state could monitor women who had moved out from under the patriarchal order of their village or home, thereby re-establishing a different form of patriarchal control.[14] The anxiety over an independent, urban and sexual woman lies at the heart of the embarrassment regarding modernity depicted in Kramskoi's painting.

In the social mélange occurring in large Russian cities, clothing became a tool to indicate or mask one's class or status. In both Moscow and St. Petersburg, the newly developed department stores became a major attraction. By the mid-nineteenth century, St. Petersburg had been established as a center of Russian fashion and the Nevsky Prospekt became the venue for displaying European fashion to all Russia.[15] European imports ranging from novels and magazines to silk stockings and parasols helped foster a climate of commodity consumption and spectacle as women engaged in the quest for the modern and the fashionable, even if the closest proximity they could gain to this attire was through employment in the shops.[16] As the bourgeois class grew and became more wealthy, they sought to blend into high society by imitating the trends in dress and manner of the Russian and European aristocracy.[17] Members of lower classes in turn sought to emulate the styles of the bourgeois and likewise align themselves with European culture.[18] The influx of provincial migrants into the major cities coincided with the development of the

[12] Barbara Alpern Engel, "Engendering Russia's History: Women in Post-Emancipation Russia and the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 2 (Summer, 1992): 314.

[13] While statistics vary widely and are impossible to calculate precisely, Richard Stites estimates that from the late 1860s to the First World War, the number of registered prostitutes in both Moscow and St. Petersburg grew from approximately 2000 to 3000. Based on this, he speculates that the number of unregistered women engaging in sex work ranged from 30,000 to 50,000, a ratio comparable to the cities of London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. Stites, "Prostitute and Society," 350–51.

[14] Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, 6.

[15] Yulia Demidenko, "Fashion and Style in St. Petersburg," in *Painting, Fashion and Style* (exh. cat. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg), ed. Joseph Kiblitsky (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2009), 26.

[16] Smith and Kelly, "Commercial Cuture," 109–10.

[17] Christine Ruane, "Subjects into Citizens: The Politics of Clothing in Imperial Russia," in *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship*, ed. Wendy Parkins (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002), 58–59.

[18] Ruane, "Subjects into Citizens," 58–59.

mass production of ready-made clothes—cheap clothes made in French styles that could easily be obtained in department stores and second-hand clothing markets.[19]

The Europeanization of modern Russian cities was not met with universal acclaim, however. From the time of Peter the Great, Russians took issue with western influence. From at least the eighteenth century the *prostoi narod* or rural population were viewed as more authentic than those of urban centers such as St. Petersburg or Moscow, where westernized aristocrats steeped in foreign luxuries seemed to be in conflict with true Russian identity.[20] In the debate between the Slavophiles and Westernizers, clothing became a perceptible way to advertise one's loyalties. Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906) sought to prove his Slavophile sympathies by attending social gatherings in ethnic Russian costume. Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) also famously adopted peasant attire as a means of publicizing his rejection of the hypocrisy of aristocratic life.[21]

In a time of swelling nationalism, when artistic productions were to discover and promote "Russianness," foreign influences were at times viewed as suspect, and social problems could be designated as "western." Prostitution itself was viewed as a western institution which had seeped into Russia as a consequence of westernizing reforms. Certain Russians associated these aspects of modern life, including the spread of venereal disease, with the degrading influence of the west.[22] In this period of modernization and urbanization, the clandestine prostitute was able to thrive in major avenues of the city. The Ligovsky and Nevsky prospekts in St. Petersburg, the Khreshchatyk in Kyiv, and the waterfront in Odesa all became common sites for sexual commerce.[23] And the venues of the modern city seemed to facilitate these liaisons—places like theaters, clubs, *cafés-chantant*, restaurants, and hotels all provided locations for arrangement and consummation of these transactions. As the main boulevard of St. Petersburg, the Nevsky Prospekt was the center of city life and culture, shopping, promenading, and the theater, as well as sexual commerce.[24]

[19] Ruane, "Subjects into Citizens," 59–60.

[20] Maureen Perrie, "*Narodnost'*: Notions of National Identity," in Kelly and Shepherd, *Constructing Russian Culture*, 29.

[21] Ruane, "Subjects into Citizens," 55. The practice of adopting peasant dress seems to have been a common trend as Slavophile apologist Konstantin Aksakov (1817–60) likewise wore peasant dress and a beard in order to bring himself closer to the people. Perrie, "*Narodnost'*," 33.

[22] Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, 8.

[23] Stites, "Prostitute and Society," 354.

[24] Stites, "Prostitute and Society," 354. Leigh also demonstrates the centrality of place in St. Petersburg in her analysis of Kramskoi's signature and his inclusion of the Cyrillic abbreviation SPB. See Leigh, *Picturing Russia's Men*, 210.