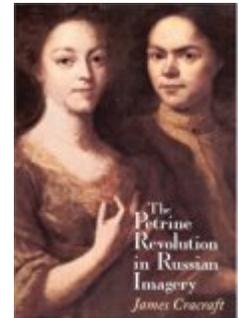


James Cracraft. *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xxiv + 375 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-11665-5.



Reviewed by Robin Bisha

Published on H-Russia (May, 2000)

James Cracraft's study is a beautiful and important contribution to the historical debate about the nature the contribution of Peter I, "the Great," to Russian history.

Cracraft's stated purpose is "to provide a concrete demonstration of cultural Europeanization in Petrine Russia in both its settings and its ramifications"(p. 5). He examines the process whereby a contemporary European aesthetic in the visual arts was deliberately imported and institutionalized in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great (p. 4). In his focus on the policies of Peter the Great, Cracraft takes a stand on the major issue that concerns historians of this period -- was Peter's "revolution" just that, or was it merely the continuation of cultural trends that had been developing throughout the late seventeenth century in Russia.

In arguing strongly for revolution over gradual change, Cracraft's work counters the thesis of Lindsay Hughes' monumental study of Peter and his reign.[1] It is interesting to note that Hughes is looking forward from the seventeenth century to the Petrine period while Cracraft is more interest-

ed in starting with the Petrine period to generate explanations for later Russian developments.

Cracraft makes a passing nod to some antecedents of Peter's taste and policies prior to the Grand Embassy (1697-1698), but spends considerable effort to demolish the idea that the changes that took place in Russian art, which he uses as a barometer of cultural Europeanization, in the early eighteenth century would have taken place without the conscious efforts of the reforming tsar and his cohorts, most notably Alexander Menshikov (p. 205).

However, Cracraft has made considerable effort to analyze pre-Petrine art, paying particular attention to the artistic heritage of Muscovy. He considers the traditions and theories of icon painting in Byzantium as earlier models for Russian visual expression. However, he finds that Russian icon painting developed largely in isolation from Byzantine trends (p.106). Cracraft also examines the heritage of European art before the eighteenth century. The works that appealed to Peter were those executed in the style of naturalism.

Cracraft presents a particularly detailed account of the adoption of European techniques and aesthetics by Russians. In Cracraft's view this process is so profound that he labels it "conversion." Of course, the convert of the greatest importance was Peter himself. Cracraft argues that the Grand Embassy marks the seminal moment in the conversion.

The innovations drawn from European art were first applied in graphic art. Before Peter's time, Cracraft argues, graphic art could not develop, at least in part, because Russia did not produce enough paper. The state maintained a monopoly on paper production during Peter's reign; thus, most works that were printed followed Peter's personal preferences and aesthetic sensibilities. Painting, particularly portraiture, developed next, along with sculpture.

According to Cracraft, after the initial period of adoption of innovations from Europe, the new techniques and aesthetic sense were institutionalized through a variety of official means. First, foreign artists were hired to execute works in the new style and to teach Russians. Then, Russian artists were required to register with one of the official government workshops before being allowed to paint (at one point Peter recalled all "poorly painted" portraits of himself and the empress, p. 298), and later the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Fine Arts (founded by Catherine II) trained artists in the new style. Peter and his successors commissioned many works of various sorts of official art, including coats of arms for both cities and families. These works reflected the new aesthetic sense, spread it, and provided employment for newly trained graphic artists and painters.

Additionally, the development of a private art market played a part in institutionalization of the innovations (p. 205). Finally, the institutionalization of the new technique and artistic style was complemented by a revolution in the representation of the country itself. Through clever projects

in cartography, Peter ensured that Russia, at least west of the Ural Mountains, was now included in Europe. It was at this time, in fact, that the Urals were designated as the boundary between Europe and Asia. Cracraft argues that "[a] critical question of Russian national identity, and of Europe's as a whole, was being visibly resolved" in the new mapmaking conventions (p. 278).

The path and extent of the diffusion of these innovations will come as no surprise to students of Russian history. While Peter could influence his court, his artistic taste was not adopted throughout the empire, or even in all of the European part of Russia. Cracraft suggests, in fact, that the new imagery did not diffuse far beyond St. Petersburg.

In his concluding chapter, which is less of a conclusion than an epilogue, Cracraft returns to the question of religious art and brings up the entirely new one, for this study, of popular imagery. He argues that secular art was a product of the Petrine revolution in imagery. He describes Russian art before Petrine innovations as almost purely religious and devotional but lacking theory (p. 106). The cultural Europeanization of Russia is reflected in the replacement of such art with official art (medals, portraits of the emperor, other objects commemorating the regime's glories), academic art (art sponsored by the Academy of Arts and Sciences and later the Academy of Fine Arts), and popular art (*lubki* on secular themes).

The revolution did not affect religious and devotional art in a significant way. Instead, the conventions of pre-Petrine icon painting came to be seen as a necessary part of the sacred in Russian icons (pp. 300-305). However, the theory of the sacred nature of pre-Petrine conventions in religious imagery was not developed or articulated until well after Peter's death. In fact, Cracraft notes a general lack of attention in the scholarly literature to religious art of the eighteenth century and calls for further research in this field.

The conclusion of this, the second volume in what the author calls "a comprehensive study of

the cultural revolution in Russian history that is inseparably linked with the person and policies of Peter I 'the Great,' is rather frustrating. After three hundred pages of evidence and analysis, including references to the first volume of Cracraft's study (on Petrine architecture), the reader learns that the importance of the Petrine revolution in visual imagery cannot be understood until the iconology of the entire imperial period in Russian history is developed (p. 313). In conclusion Cracraft poses essentially the same question he started with and calls for more research on the problem. Of course, the call for further research is an accepted trope in academic writing, but this formulation ends up seeming to sell short the contribution of this work.

In placing the emphasis on the visual in a work of history (rather than art history), Cracraft adds an important dimension to our understanding of the changes that took place in Russia in the early eighteenth century. Scholars have written much about the reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church under Petrine rule, but bureaucratization has been the focus of this work. Cracraft adds a visual element to the reform that makes it even easier to understand why believers would resist the reforms. The *Ecclesiastical Regulation* called for the seizure of "miracle working" icons from private homes and the removal of domestic (and according to Peter, badly painted) icons from parish churches, both of which would not only change the look of homes and churches but Orthodox practice as well (p. 296).

Cracraft has pulled together an immense amount of scholarship, much of it in art history, and primary source material to support his argument that Peter was the necessary agent of change in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Russia. The book is wonderfully illustrated with 130 plates (thirty five of them in color). Almost forty pages of notes document the work, and another eleven pages are devoted to a comprehensive bibliography of relevant scholarly works

in Russian and English (along with a few German and French works). Cracraft's work took him to all the major Russian libraries, archives, and art museums (including the Russian Museum and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the Tret'iakov Gallery in Moscow), as well as some notable U.S. collections.

Much of Cracraft's contribution can be seen in his analysis of works of art history to answer questions of interest to social and political historians. He is often successful in making this leap, but sometimes his sentences seem to be built almost entirely from translated quotations from Russian studies (examples are too numerous to note). He states that he is not concerned with issues of the quality of artworks, but he does judge the quality of Russian work in comparison with contemporary European work, as his subjects and sources would have done (p. 189, for example).

The book provides a comprehensive social history of art in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Cracraft has constructed biographies of artists from scarce archival evidence. He assesses the relative importance of various art forms by the salaries practitioners received for their work in official workshops. In particular, he notes the decline of icon painting and its replacement with graphic art as the preferred recipient of imperial funding.

At its heart this is not simply a study of visual imagery. Cracraft's overarching project is documentation of Russia's cultural Europeanization as a result of the policies of Peter the Great. As such, this is a study of the diffusion of innovations. In his concluding remarks Cracraft suggests that his point has been argued rather than fully demonstrated (p. 311). In spite of the impressive documentation and dense narrative, this does sometimes seem to be the case. Cracraft's assertions could perhaps be supported by reference to the scholarly literature on the theory of diffusion of innovations. Through references to this literature,

Cracraft could support some of his assumptions with theory.[2]

Certainly there are many points with which one may take issue with a work which examines questions of such grand scope. I would like to raise just one. Throughout this work, Cracraft argues against Marxist and, according to his view, excessively nationalist scholars of the Soviet period who consistently overestimated the quality and creativity of native Russian art in the late seventeenth century. In creating this straw man, Cracraft appears to be relying primarily on the interpretive framework that my professors in graduate school trained us, basically, to ignore.

While the Soviet regime was in power, we tried to find the scholar's contribution in the body of a work, or sometimes the body of a paragraph, where it was assumed the scholar had made the final interpretive decisions. We assumed that the broader interpretations were imposed on most works to make sure they reflected the current Party line. In the post-Soviet era are we now to hold scholars responsible for such views?

Notes

[1]. Lindsey Hughes. *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. See my review in *Russian Review* (1999).

[2]. Perhaps the best place to start in reviewing this literature is Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, third edition (New York and London: The Free Press, 1983).

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Robin Bisha. Review of Cracraft, James. *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4137>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.