Not a mere chronological collection of facts, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* constitutes a thematic study of the relevant events, most influential institutions, leading artists, and significant paintings in the given period. In her monograph, Rosalind P. Blakesley retraces the development of untrained journeymen to professional artists in parallel to the birth and evolution of the collective identity of the Russian school of painting. Focusing on the question of how a society without any concept of a national school of painting evolved into an environment where independent, self-aware painters found artistic appreciation and financial subsistence for their specifically national art, Blakesley reveals the various structures necessary for this development. Furthermore, she reevaluates the role of the Imperial Academy of Arts and offers a more inclusive history of Russian art.

The ten chapters of roughly equal length are subdivided into two main parts. The first part, “Educators,” comprises the first four chapters and relates to the educational premises for the development of any school of painting. Blakesley comprehensively locates the starting point of Russian artistic education in the fine arts in 1757, with the foundation of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. The first chapter elucidates the constitution of the early academy and its structures, clearly surveying the political and international circumstances that led to the formation of this leading institution and its affiliate network, including a painting school. Thematic case studies expound the life and work of the academy’s first members in the second chapter, followed by a detailed analysis of the various challenges and changes accompanying the evolution of the academy, some of which brought forth the Society for the Encouragement of Artists. The first part concludes with observations on the formation of educational institutions beyond St. Petersburg, among them painting schools in the provinces and the Moscow School of Painting and Sculpture.

The second part, “Satellites,” examines the developments outside of St. Petersburg, farther away yet not beyond the reach of the academy’s intervention. The fifth and sixth chapters are dedicated to Russian artists abroad, mostly financially supported by the academy, as pensioners or under the patronage of those close to the academy, like the Society for the Encouragement of Artists. In the following chapter, Blakesley shifts her focus toward artists working and living in Russia, though outside the metropolitan areas of St. Petersburg and Moscow. In doing so, she reassesses the discourse by additionally referring to the artists working in the academy’s periphery, namely, outside the standard system of patronage. Critical re-
flections upon the academy and its structures are broached in the two subsequent chapters, among them the Revolt of the Fourteen whose motives to withdraw from the academy out of protest are clearly expounded in a broader context. The closer scrutiny of the formation of the Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions and of the debate on realist art reveals the academy’s impact on and its support of the realist artists. Surprisingly, Blakesley concludes with the obstacles encountered by the seldomly considered Russian women artists of the period. The final pages of The Russian Canvas are dedicated to the paintings in the ninth Wanderers’ exhibition in St. Petersburg and the assassination of Tsar Alexander II which happened to coincide with the exhibition’s opening in 1881.

Throughout the entire monograph, Blakesley positions the discourse regarding a Russian school of art in the pan-European context, comprehensively referring to traditions and developments of academies and art in western Europe. She openly discusses that the Académie française was more than just an inspiration for the Imperial Academy of Arts, but takes care to elaborate the Russian tweaks to the French original. Detailed case studies present the academy’s effort to train able and professional artists capable of winning commissions by the imperial court, while retracing the careers of Russian artists gives insight into their lives and working conditions in contrast to artists of foreign origin. Approaching the evolution of Russian painting in a pan-European and transcultural environment enriches the scholarly discourse and allows for a critical reassessment of already established views, comprising, among others, the impact of foreign artistic movements on Russian painters, such as the influences of German and French landscapists on Ivan Shishkin's mesmerizing Russian landscapes. By examining the travels of Russian painters and their comments on western European art, Blakesley circumstantiates the continuing appreciation of European artists by their Russian contemporaries despite the academy’s attempts to discourage any foreign leverage in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, she includes comments of European contemporaries on Russian painting and their reception by the Russian elite, thereby providing a broader context. Blakesley’s keen sense of the intricacies of the Russian language expresses itself in her explanation of the differences between the words iskusstvo and khudozhestvo, both translated as “art,” or russkii and rossiiskii, two words for “Russian,” giving the non-Russian reader the opportunity to understand the subtlety of language used in Russian publications, critiques, and exhibition reviews.

Elaborating a variety of examples and material for the academy’s support of realist artists, such as the patronage of Ilya Repin while he worked on his Barge Haulers on the Volga (1870–3), Blakesley succeeds in her self-imposed task to reevaluate the academy’s reputation in the late nineteenth century. Her cutting-edge research is also revealed in her portrayal of the Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions, the Peredvizhniki, translated as the Wanderers. Her critical discussion of the association’s aims disproves the inveterate mythologizing structures of the Soviet interpretation of the Wanderers as the academy’s antagonist. In doing so, she emphasizes the association’s financial motives and consolidates the current view among experts.

Adhering closely to the book’s title, Blakesley confines her arguments mostly to Russian painting, only hinting at other artistic media, like sculpture and architecture. Russian artists in particular occupied themselves with more than one medium and experimented with other art forms, such as the popular prints, the lubki. In addition, contemporary literature and theater were reflected in the artists’ works. Blakesley’s well-detailed description of satirical painting relating to Nikolai Gogol’s satirical literature is only one example for artistic outreach that culminated in the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk at the end of the nineteenth century. Other of her case studies would have benefited from an equally thorough treatment, though curtailing this aspect is an understandable and,
considering the book’s opulent extent, necessary choice. Nonetheless, cultural assets represented an additional approach for creating a collective identity and the artists’ engagement with them shaped their self-perception and contributed to the formation of a national identity.

In *The Russian Canvas*, art historical analyses are skillfully intertwined with historical, political, and sociological background, providing a splendid overview and several starting points for further investigations, like the comparative discussion of Dmitri Levitsky’s portraits and those by Thomas Gainsborough in the second chapter. On the one hand, this kaleidoscope of possibilities offers various opportunities for future research; on the other hand, it leaves the interested scholar’s curiosity unsatisfied for the time being. Alas, the detailed inclusion of every promising approach would have gone beyond the scope, especially since the volume is already filled to the brim with marvelous case studies, conclusive analyses, and high-resolution illustrations, the quality and extent of which makes you want to read more. Secondary reading galore can be found in the detailed notes and the well-structured bibliography, including a wide range of archival material, the essence of a broad collection of Russian and international publications, and even yet unpublished research, missing only—to complain at a high level—a table of figures.

Following her description of the unveiling of Vasily Surikov’s *Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy* (1881) while the tsar is brutally slaughtered only a stone’s throw away, Blakesley offers a monograph that is as captivating as a crime thriller on top of being a fascinating and well-researched book on art historiography. The great accomplishment of *The Russian Canvas* is the diversity of readers it addresses. Blakesley’s ability to effortlessly embed high-quality academic research in a captivating narrative creates a book appealing to both the professional scholar and the interested layman, thereby making Russian painting accessible for an audience broader than ever before.
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