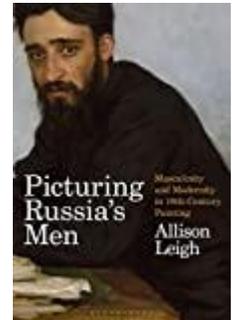


**Allison Leigh.** *Picturing Russia's Men: Masculinity and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Painting.* New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. Illustrations. 296 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5013-4179-3.



**Reviewed by** Alla Myzelev (University of New York at Geneseo)

**Published on** H-SHERA (January, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

*Picturing Russia's Men* is a welcome addition to the discipline of masculinity studies in nineteenth-century Russia. Notions of masculinity provide a fertile field of inquiry in both visual and cultural studies, shedding new light on processes of gender formation before and after the Bolshevik revolution and continuing to the present day. Using five extensive case studies of nineteenth-century Russian painters, Allison Leigh interrogates the lived experience of what it meant to be a man, an artist, a friend, a husband, a father, and a son. The author highlights the experiences of Karl Briullov, Pavel Fedotov, Aleksandr Ivanov, Ivan Kramskoi, and Il'ia Repin.

Chapter 1 explores the artistic and stylistic development of one of Russia's most important nineteenth-century neoclassicists: Karl Briullov. The author aptly follows the trajectory of the artist's life, starting with his complex relationship with his father and ending with his great success as a venerated Russian artist at the end of his life. She shows how his struggle of being an obedient son to an abusive father and later a husband whose

marriage was quickly dissolved influenced his art. The second chapter tells the story of Pavel Fedotov, a military man turned artist. Leigh underscores the inner conflict that the artist experienced as a military man who felt the need to fulfill the role of the protector of the homeland along with the role of the breadwinner for his family. Being an artist came with a significant price for Fedotov since he failed to gain success in the increasingly conservative atmosphere of Nicholas I's rule, especially following the wave of the European revolutionary events of 1848. Poverty and mental illness made Fedotov's life and art practice nearly impossible. The next chapter analyzes Alexander Ivanov's interest in the depiction of the male body. Ivanov, who, similar to Fedotov, is less familiar to the non-Russian audience, is a great resource for additional research and teaching. Leigh's reading of Ivanov's art reveals his admiration for the male body and his ultimate difficulties in coming to terms with the stringent limitations of masculinity. One of the things that by this point become a leitmotif of the volume is the de-

sire and the need to escape Russia for such artists as Ivanov or Briullov to not only explore European art but also give oneself an ability to escape the suffocating demands of Russian masculinity.

The following chapter changes the established rhythm of the volume by providing a case study of not one artist but a whole group. The Artel of Artists was a group of fourteen young male artists who, due to the conflict with the conservative and traditional Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, decided to withdraw from the academy without presenting their final projects. Most members of the group lived and worked together in a type of working cooperative. The author traces the history of the Artel of Artists and its ultimate demise, concentrating on how its members negotiated the demands of such cooperative living, having a family (in some cases), and at least for some also increased fame and importance of their art. Ivan Kramskoi, a realist painter, was one of the main organizers of the group and later became an important Russian artist. Kramskoi's trajectory as an Artel of Artists member and advocate is continued in chapter 5 where Leigh analyzes Kramskoi's portraits of women. Through self-portraits and portraits of his wife, daughter, son, and other women, the artist emerges as a contradictory figure who both loved and respected his family but also had to come to terms with what he perceived as indecent temptations and desires. Through his portraits, we glimpse his understanding of the role of the father in his children's lives and the desire to rethink the traditional notion of Russian fatherhood as requiring admiration and obedience. The last chapter of the book is dedicated to Il'ia Repin, one of Russia's most important and well-known artists. Leigh here offers a revision of Soviet secondary sources on the artist to hint at Repin's possible homoeroticism through the analysis of his representation of the writer Vsevolod Garshin who later ended up going insane.

The volume highlights not so much the artworks, although they are given an important place and analyzed in depth, but more so the artists' experiences. Each of the artists had to navigate a conservative, conventional, and stifling milieu of Russian society and at the same time develop their artistic personality through their art, most of which at first glance seems conventional. Thus one of the most important contributions of Leigh's scholarship lies in the rethinking of the artworks that were known and discussed mainly by Soviet art scholars and whose role in the nineteenth century is only being discovered by Western scholars. One example is Ivanov's *Apollo, Hyacinthus, and Cypress, Playing Music and Singing* (1831-34). Through careful reading of the sketches, analysis of other Ivanov's works, and examination of the changes he made, Leigh convincingly argues that the representation of the figures is intentionally sexually ambiguous. While looking at Ivanov's life and work holistically, she, following Rosalind Polly Gray's argument, changes our understanding of Ivanov's work to invite future scholars to apply queer and gender theories.[1]

Leigh's methodology combines several aspects of the art historical method. She uses artists' accounts such as letters, exhibition reviews, and secondary sources to recreate artists' inspiration. Yet her most important primary sources are the paintings themselves. Meticulously and precisely examined, the paintings become a reader's roadmap for an understanding of the artists' complex and contradictory motivations. Thus, with its emphasis on masculinity, the book is primarily an art historical analysis of the nineteenth-century social and cultural milieu.

The only puzzling issue about the volume, at least for me, is Leigh's decision to use the term "short 19th century." Her analysis culminates with her discussion of Repin's and Kramskoi's works of the 1880s. While stylistically potentially sound, the abrupt stop at the 1880s seems arbitrary since the next generation of artists, such as Alexandre

Benois, Leon Bakst, and Konstantin Somov, provides no less exciting material for the study of masculinity. An analysis of Somov's self-portraits or Bakst's portrait of Benois (1898) would have made a worthwhile addition to the volume. These works of art would have helped to answer the questions that Leigh so astutely asks and answers in the book, "what were men's desires, aspirations, and fears in this historical moment? Did most find fulfillment in the settled versions of manhood prescribed to them or did a significant majority find such exhortations stifling?" (p. 254). Leigh's work is a contemplation on the realism of representation of the male experience in the nineteenth cen-

tury with its struggles and occasional rewards. Especially strong in the volume is the desire to understand the personal and social as interrelated entities that find their expression in neoclassical, realist, and symbolist paintings. The approach of using microhistories in this analysis deserves every praise since Leigh succeeds in a rare art historian's achievement of bringing to life both the artists and the fruits of their labor.

#### Note

[1]. Rosalind Polly Gray, "The Homo-Erotic Paintings of Alexander Ivanov," in *Gender and Sexuality in Russian Civilisation*, ed. Peter Barta (Abington: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 163.

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

**Citation:** Alla Myzelev. Review of Leigh, Allison. *Picturing Russia's Men: Masculinity and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Painting*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. January, 2022.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56157>



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