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# Review of The Bronze Horseman: Falconet's Monument to Peter the Great, by Alexander M. Schenker

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# Review of The Bronze Horseman: Falconet's Monument to Peter the Great, by Alexander M. Schenker

## **Comments**

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*The Bronze Horseman: Falconet's Monument to Peter the Great.* By Alexander M. Schenker. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. xv, 398 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Map. \$65.00, hard bound.

Alexander M. Schenker's monograph on Etienne-Maurice Falconet's monument to Peter the Great is at once a history of this celebrated monument's making, a biography of its makers, and a case study exploring the cultural ties between Russia and France during the reign of Catherine the Great. It is also a thoughtful meditation on the monument's role in defining the cultural identity of post-Petrine Russia for successive generations. It encourages us to look with fresh eyes on this almost too familiar image and to reconsider the reasons for its enduring importance.

Schenker devotes the first three chapters to exploring the world of ideas and events in which the monument was conceived. The early careers of French sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet and his "disciple, collaborator, and lifelong companion, Marie-Anne Collot" (16) are meticulously chronicled, as the couple moves from Enlightenment Paris to the St. Petersburg of Catherine the Great. Schenker creates a compelling psychological portrait of his irritable and often irritating hero, whose personal foibles placed so many obstacles in the way of his grand designs. The story is lovingly researched, written with verve and a delight in the minutiae of eighteenth-century lives and intrigues.

What made Falconet unique among his peers were his intellect and his literary aspirations. His ponderous debates with Denis Diderot on the relationship of text and image, ("Le pour et contre"); his treatise on the shortcomings of the Marcus Aurelius monument (until then the accepted prototype for all equestrian statues), and his translation and commentary on Pliny the Elder are closely analyzed as essential factors in understanding, not just why Catherine the Great chose him to realize the most important political work of art of her reign, but also why he was able to make the creative leap from traditional forms into a genuinely new visual conceit. Falconet's writings provide vital clues to why, as Schenker points out, with the completion of the Bronze Horseman Falconet went from being "one of the many very good sculptors of his generation" to occupying "a place of eminence in the annals of eighteenth century art" (51).

Schenker next turns to the dramatic events of the monument's actual construction. The powerful chapter on moving the Thunder Rock, the massive granite boulder that formed the monument's base, highlights the sheer mechanical genius of the undertaking and reminds us of the resources Catherine was ready to spend on the monument, keenly aware that the world was watching. Similarly, the casting of the monument is documented

in minute detail, and it is instructive to see it treated within the broader context of other important European commissions of the eighteenth century.

In a close reading of the monument as visual form (chapter 8), Schenker distills two centuries of divergent interpretations into an analysis that would make excellent reading for students grappling with the way images communicate ideas. He shows how, with elements like the raised right hand (threatening or benign?) and the horse's gait (leaping or pulled up short?), Falconet created an image whose ambiguous and multivalent meanings made it a perfect metaphor for the history of post-Petrine Russia and the troubled relationship between ruler and ruled. Schenker, a philologist, is keenly aware of the challenges involved in explaining the enduring appeal of great works of art, using Falconet's debate with Denis Diderot on the interchange of word and image as a touchstone for the entire book.

Among the book's important contributions is the central role accorded Marie-Anne Collot, to whom authorship of the horseman's head has traditionally been attributed. Schenker has quite rightly given her a central role as Falconet's lifelong companion and, he argues, lover; and he stresses that she was a gifted portrait sculptor esteemed by her contemporaries. It therefore comes as a shock to read the brief section in which Collot's actual contribution to the monument is discussed. On rather flimsy speculative grounds Schenker rejects Falconet's own claim that Collot was the sole author of the horseman's head, favoring instead the view of "modern doubters" like David Arkin that "Collot provided Falconet with a portrait of the tsar, but that he then altered it to suit his vision" (286). Despite Schenker's obvious sympathy for Collot the woman and helpmate, as an artist she emerges curiously diminished by this equivocal stand and her claim to be one of its makers suddenly seems tenuous.

This definitive work on Falconet and his monument will be invaluable to anyone working in the field of eighteenth-century studies. But it is also, quite consciously, a product of modern history. Published in 2003 to coincide with the tercentenary of the founding of St. Petersburg, it is itself one more link in the long chain of commentaries on "the St. Petersburg theme" dating back to Aleksandr Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman*.