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## Viktor Vasnetsov's New Icons: From Abramtsevo to the 1900 Paris Exposition

Wendy Salmond

Professor of Art History, Chapman University

*salmond@chapman.edu*

### Abstract

This essay examines Russian artist Viktor Vasnetsov's search for a new kind of prayer icon in the closing decades of the nineteenth century: a hybrid of icon and painting that would reconcile Russia's historic contradictions and launch a renaissance of national culture and faith. Beginning with his icons for the Church of the "Savior Not Made by Hands" at Abramtsevo in 1880–81, for two decades Vasnetsov was hailed as an innovator, the four icons he sent to the Paris "Exposition Universelle" of 1900 marking the culmination of his vision. After 1900, his religious painting polarized elite Russian society and was bitterly attacked in advanced art circles. Yet Vasnetsov's new icons were increasingly linked with popular culture and the many copies made of them in the late Imperial period suggest that his hybrid image spoke to a generation seeking a resolution to the dilemma of how modern Orthodox worshippers should pray.

### Keywords

Viktor Vasnetsov – prayer icon – icon painting – Abramtsevo – Viatka – Saint Olga – St. Vladimir Cathedral, Kiev – Paris – "Exposition Universelle"

Toward the end of 1899, Viktor Vasnetsov sent off seven of his paintings to the Russian Fine Arts section at the upcoming "Exposition Universelle" in Paris.<sup>1</sup> A grainy photo from an exhibition guidebook shows four of them in a corner of the Grand Palais, surrounded by landscapes, genre scenes, history paintings, and sculpture by some of Russia's leading artists (**Fig. 1**). High up in the corner, just where an Orthodox viewer

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibited works were: *Knight at the Crossroads* (1878), *The Pond* (1880), *Battle of the Scythians and Slavs* and *Alenushka* (both 1881), *Mother of God* (1889), *Gamaiun the Prophetic Bird* (1897), and *Triptych* (a copy of three icons from his iconostasis of St. Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev, which Vasnetsov commissioned in 1898–99).

would expect an icon to be, hung a full-length image of the Mother of God gliding through a dawn-streaked sky, the Christ Child stretching out his arms to the viewer.<sup>2</sup> Beneath, framed as a triptych, was the life-size image of Christ Enthroned with the Mother of God cradling the Child on the left wing and Saint Olga on the right.<sup>3</sup> The strict symmetry of the whole display heightened the essential difference between these four sacred images and the secular pictures around them. Like the icon corner they resembled, they invited not aesthetic contemplation but prayer.

For Vasnetsov these four paintings were indeed meant to serve as a new kind of prayer icon (*molebnaia ikona*) for modern times.<sup>4</sup> Copied from the artist's original paintings in the apse and iconostasis of St. Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev (1885-1895) (**Fig. 2**), they were the distillation of fifteen years' experience as Russia's premier religious painter: hybrid icon-paintings (*ikony-kartiny*) that melded the techniques of realism with the pictorial conventions of religious painting inherited from Byzantium. When St. Vladimir was completed in 1895, Vasnetsov's modern icons brought him international acclaim. Yet almost immediately after the Paris Exposition his reputation in progressive art circles plummeted. Former admirers dismissed him as a mere fashionable icon-

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<sup>2</sup> The painting was loaned by Adrian and Emiliia Prakhov, to whom Vasnetsov had given it in 1889. It is now in the Church Archaeology Cabinet of the Moscow Theological Seminary, Sergiev Posad.

<sup>3</sup> Vasnetsov was dubious about lending copies of icons that had been blessed for prayer to "such an international bazaar as the exhibition in Paris." He later offered the triptych for auction in aid of those wounded in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. See *V. M. Vasnetsov. Pis'ma. Dnevnik. Vospominaniia. Suzhdeniia sovremennikov*, ed. and comp. Nina Ia. Iaroslavtseva (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), 229, n. 300.1. In 2016, the triptych was a highlight of the exhibition "Art Treasures of Russia" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

<sup>4</sup> Although wall paintings made up the bulk of Vasnetsov's work in St. Vladimir Cathedral their function was didactic rather than devotional. Veneration was reserved for the icons located in the iconostasis.

painter, a “false witness” even. The modernity of his religious vision now seemed worlds apart from the medieval icons being collected and exhibited in increasing numbers.

My essay explores the brief sliver of time when Vasnetsov’s icon paintings were still widely seen as a progressive solution to the task of fostering religious faith in an age of doubt. Like the Nazarenes and Pre-Raphaelites before him, Vasnetsov turned to forms of spiritual expression long dismissed as primitive and aesthetically outmoded by professionally trained artists and their public. First conceived for the Church of the “Savior Not Made by Hands” at Abramtsevo, Vasnetsov’s icon paintings exemplified the Abramtsevo community’s commitment to forging a link between an imagined national past and a rapidly modernizing present. That Russia’s artistic elite soon lost faith in this approach to keeping national heritage alive raises intriguing questions about Abramtsevo’s place—and Vasnetsov’s—in the historiography of Russian modernism.<sup>5</sup>

### **A dream of community**

The icons that Orthodox Russians prayed before provided a particularly tangible expression of national tensions in the post-reform Russia of Vasnetsov’s adolescence (he was thirteen in 1861, the year of the Emancipation Manifesto.) The icon’s schismatic potential could be traced back to the reforms of Patriarch Nikon in the 1650s, but was further exacerbated in the reign of Peter the Great, who attempted to curtail the production of holy images that foreigners might consider “ugly” for their transgression of anatomical and spatial norms. Educated Orthodox believers increasingly expected to have

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<sup>5</sup> See Wendy Salmond, “The Russian Avant-Garde of the 1890s: The Abramtsevo Circle,” *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum*, vol. 60/61 (2002/2003): 7–13.

their spiritual needs met without offense to their westernized aesthetic sensibility, and by Alexander II's reign the walls and iconostases of old and new churches were mostly filled with new academic or realist icons crowding out old ones in the name of *blagolepie* (seemliness). Traditional icon painting serving the needs of the population at large survived in the villages of Mstera, Kholui, and Palekh.<sup>6</sup> But a surprising number of professionally trained artists subsidized their "free" creative activities with commissions for wall paintings and icons designed to satisfy an elite audience for whom traditionally painted icons were a sign of cultural backwardness.

Icons also lay at the heart of one of the post-reform era's "accursed questions": the growing gulf between an intelligentsia who "had lost their need to gaze upon the face of Christ or the saints" and the peasantry's faith in the efficacy of holy images.<sup>7</sup> Scenes of icons used and abused were ubiquitous in the paintings of the *Peredvizhniki* and other painters of the Russian scene, among them the young Viktor Vasnetsov. In 1867, he had left his native Viatka and the prospect of a career in the priesthood to train as an artist at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. His early interest in the miraculous agency of icons is reflected in the oil sketch *Bringing Out the Icon* (1870s), in which a large church icon is reverently shepherded from a house to which it has been brought to bless the inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> In all likelihood Vasnetsov was portraying an icon familiar to him

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<sup>6</sup> See Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia.*, trans. and ed. Robin Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Vera Shevzov, "Between Purity and Pluralism. Icon and Anathema in Modern Russia, 1860–1917," in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. Jefferson J.A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park: Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>8</sup> See Nikolai Morgunov and Nataliia Morgunova-Rudnitskaia, *Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962), 136.

from childhood—the miracle-working Viatka Savior, which made an annual journey to dozens of villages in the lower reaches of the Viatka River.<sup>9</sup>

Vasnetsov's interest in icons took a new turn in 1870, when he produced a drawing on the theme of *A Prince's Icon-Painting Workshop* for an Academy project. Inspired by Ivan Zabelin's vivid new histories of life in pre-Petrine Rus', he imagined the milieu in which an icon like the Viatka Savior might have been created two or three centuries before. Though only the back of the icon is visible, its impressive size announces its central role in the narrative. With its carefully researched details, this historical genre picture conjured a vision of Old Rus' that Vasnetsov would increasingly come to identify with.

At the request of Savva and Elizaveta Mamontov, Vasnetsov produced a second version of *A Prince's Icon-Painting Workshop* in 1879, when he made his first visit to Abramtsevo (**Fig. 3**).<sup>10</sup> A year later, the couple and their artist friends were already thinking of building a church on the estate, and in 1881 Vasnetsov painted his first icon for the local row of its iconostasis (**Fig. 4**). Simple and asymmetrical in design, the Abramtsevo iconostasis represented a rupture with contemporary norms of religious art no less radical than the architecture of the church itself.<sup>11</sup> Each of the artists who painted images for the iconostasis—the others were Nikolai Nevrev, Vasilii Polenov, Ilia Repin,

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<sup>9</sup> On Vasnetsov's Viatka period see Tat'iana Malysheva, "Vitiiaz' na rasput'e vzial kurs na Golgofu. Religioznaia drama Viktora Vasnetsova," *Binokl'*, no. 11 (November 2000), <http://binokl-vyatka.narod.ru/B11/malysh.htm> (accessed 1 August 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Savva Mamontov included the drawing in one of his early publishing projects, the album *Risunki russkikh khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Tip. A.I. Mamontova i Ko., 1880). The 1870 version is in the State Russian Museum.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike the church itself, the iconostasis has received only cursory mention. The exception is the detailed analysis in Oleg Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art. From Early Icons to Malevich* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 105–24, 135–43.

and Repin's wife Vera—used the opportunity to envision a modern prayer icon in the light of their own aesthetic preoccupations. Nataliia Polenova, a participant in the decoration of the interior, captured this sense of new beginnings in her description of Vasnetsov's icon of Saint Sergius of Radonezh. It was, she wrote, “a new form, not dry icon painting, not following church conventions, and not classical, but deeply truthful and full of feeling [...] for many, and especially for [Elizaveta Mamontova], it immediately made the building of the church not just an artistic enterprise, but prompted them to delve deeper into its religious aspect.”<sup>12</sup>

Three years after the completion of the Abramtsevo church, in 1885, Vasnetsov became chief artist of the grandiose decorative program for the new St. Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev. He embraced the challenge of painting a new kind of sacred image that would unite the whole Russian people. In a letter to Elizaveta Mamontova, Vasnetsov described his search for an image of Christ that would reconcile the individualism of the *Peredvizhniki* (those artists such as Ivan Kramskoi and Nikolai Ge) with the universality he found in both Byzantine images and the icons venerated by the Russian *narod*. Thus far, he wrote to Mamontova, “the best Christ in all of Europe over the past few centuries” had been painted by Alexander Ivanov, whose *Appearance of Christ to the People* (1837–57) was a source of inspiration for the entire Abramtsevo

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<sup>12</sup> Nataliia V. Polenova's memoirs, cited in Eleonora Paston, *Abramtsevo. Iskusstvo i zhizn'* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 2003), 85. On the significance of this communal spirit, see Inge Wierda, “Abramtsevo's Neo-medieval Church: A Manifestation of Sobornost,” in *Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity* (*Eastern Christian Studies*, 6), eds. Jonathan Sutton and William van den Bercken (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2005).

circle.<sup>13</sup> Even so, he found Ivanov's approach to the representation of Christ "somewhat one-sided" and sought to strike a more even balance between the personal, western concept of Christ and the universal vision he associated with Byzantium and traditional Russian icons.<sup>14</sup>

Similar synthetic goals governed his colossal image of the Mother of God in the apse behind the altar. An elaboration of the small icon he had painted for the Abramtsevo church, the liveliness that Vasnetsov brought to the composition's canonical form originated in a memory of his infant son wriggling out of his wife's arms as he reached up to grasp the clouds. In its majestic new environment, the massive image on its golden ground was an homage to the twelfth-century mosaic of the Oranta Mother of God in the apse of Kiev's Cathedral of Saint Sophia. Yet contemporaries also easily identified the artist's debt to Raphael's Sistine Madonna, one of the most celebrated paintings of the nineteenth century, and some also discerned a resemblance to the figure of Christ in Ivanov's *Appearance of Christ*.

When St. Vladimir Cathedral was consecrated a decade later, Vasnetsov's Herculean achievement was greeted with unprecedented enthusiasm. A major supporter was the French archaeologist and Russophile Baron Joseph de Baye, who took on the task of promoting Vasnetsov's religious painting in France.<sup>15</sup> De Baye was among the first to

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<sup>13</sup> Ivanov's work gained a new importance for painters with Mikhail Botkin's publication of his biography and correspondence. See Mikhail Botkin, *Aleksandr Andreevich Ivanov: Ego zhizn' i perepiska 1806–1858 gg.* (St. Petersburg: Tip. M.M. Stasiulevicha, 1880). See also Ol'ga D. Atroshchenko, "Vasilii Polenov i Aleksandr Ivanov. K istorii tserkvi Kologrivskogo uchilishcha," *Sobranie*, 1 (2004): 104–15.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Mamontova, 20 August 1889, in *V. M. Vasnetsov. Pis'ma. Dnevnik*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to publishing a monograph on Vasnetsov (*L'oeuvre de Victor Vasnetzoff devant l'Ecole moderne de Peinture en Russie* [Reims : Impr. de l'Acad., 1895]), De Baye lectured on the artist's St. Vladimir paintings six times



frame the artist's religious vision in the light of a long-awaited reconciliation of imperial Russia's divided cultural legacy. De Baye presented him as both innovator and renovator, "at the head of a renaissance and a recovery of Russian national and religious painting."<sup>16</sup> Here was a modern vision of faith for the entire nation regardless of class or education, a place for "the peasant to find sustenance for his piety and images for the celestial splendors that he conceived in his robust faith; for the priest to find teachings there that accord with the truths he teaches; and for the educated man to derive [...] inspiration to lift him above the earthly sphere."<sup>17</sup>

Impressed by this recognition from abroad, Vasnetsov's compatriots joined in the praise with an unanimity rarely accorded a native-born artist.<sup>18</sup> A central theme emerged across the spectrum of responses: St. Vladimir Cathedral represented an entirely new way forward for modern Russian art, a synthesis drawn from the opposing poles of Byzantium and Western Europe that had shaped national consciousness in the Imperial era. The limitations of realism and naturalism for religious art were acknowledged, while Vasnetsov's use of archaic methods, far from being a source of shame, was seen as an innovation that foreigners were beginning to envy.<sup>19</sup> By sympathetically mediating the

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to French learned societies in 1895. As a result, he claimed, "your name is greeted everywhere as the name of a great artist." Cited in *V.M. Vasnetsov. Pis'ma. Dnevnik*, 273.

<sup>16</sup> De Baye "L'Oeuvre de Victor Vasnetzoff devant l'école modern de peinture en Russie," 223.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>18</sup> On the critics' responses, see K. I. Maslov, "Rospisi V.M. Vasnetsova vo Vladimirskom sobore v khudozhestvennoi kritike kontsa XIX veka," *Vestnik PSTGU. Seriya V: Voprosy istorii i teorii khristianskogo iskusstva*, no. 28 (2017): 83–108.

<sup>19</sup> V. Ilarionov [V. K. Georgievskii], "Provozvestnik novogo napravleniia v russkoi religioznoi zhivopisi." Cited in *V.M. Vasnetsov. Pis'ma. Dnevnik*, 158.

“artistic truth” of western painting with the “spiritual truth” of icon painting—variously described as “schematic, stylized, mannered, ugly, clumsy, incorrect”—Vasnetsov created a hybrid whose two main ingredients everyone could detect and read. Standing beneath the great vaults of St. Vladimir Cathedral, one critic enthused, “You are in the real old Rus of the Grand Princes, among its ineptly naïve and yet touchingly expressive religious representations, made into a pearl of art by all the skills of modern artistic technique.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Backlash**

The effusive praise heaped on Vasnetsov’s head throughout the late 1890s made it all the more shocking that he was not awarded a Gold Medal for his paintings at the Paris “Exposition Universelle” of 1900.<sup>21</sup> Within the year, Russia’s cultural elite began to experience its first doubts about the authenticity of Vasnetsov’s religious vision. Was it a brilliantly innovative response to Russia’s medieval icon tradition? Or merely an elevated form of modern religious kitsch?

The epicenter of these rumblings was the World of Art group, whose leading members had wholeheartedly embraced Vasnetsov as an ally in their fight for a new Russian art.<sup>22</sup> Sergei Diaghilev launched the *World of Art* magazine in 1898 with a first issue that strategically placed the artist at the heart of a Russian renaissance. Dmitrii Filosofov in particular welcomed the decoration of St. Vladimir Cathedral as a “most

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<sup>20</sup> V. M. Vasnetsov. *Pis'ma. Dnevnik. Vospominaniia*, 159.

<sup>21</sup> By contrast, the iconostasis he designed for the Moscow firm of Ovchinnikov & Co. was an enormous success.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Irina Shevelenko, *Arkhaizm kak modernizm. Nacionalizm i poiski modernisticheskoi estetiki* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017).

remarkable attempt after a two-hundred-year break to once more go to the people and in their midst, in their church traditions to look for the strength and the means to unite two camps that have so little understanding of each other.”<sup>23</sup> But in 1901 Alexandre Benois assessed Vasnetsov very differently in his *History of Russian Painting*, pouring icy water on his friends’ euphoria, which he saw as symptomatic of the Russian intelligentsia’s unhealthy *fin-de-siècle* dabbling in mysticism. Benois was genuinely affronted by Vasnetsov’s “frivolous paraphrases, if not parodies, of early icon painting.”<sup>24</sup> He jeered unkindly at his hard-won synthesis of traditions—the Mother of God was severe, yet coquettish, her pose was “elongated in the Byzantine fashion” yet had a “purely contemporary elegance.”<sup>25</sup> From the wide-open eyes and archaic stiffness of the figures’ poses to the half-Eastern, half-Western ornament, Benois dismissed these as hackneyed gimmicks from the repertoire of Karl Briullov, Hippolyte Flandrin, and the Pre-Raphaelites’ epigones. The spark of doubt spread rapidly and by 1904 the disillusionment was complete: Vasnetsov had deteriorated into a “fashionable icon painter,” “a celebrated inventor of Madonnas.”<sup>26</sup>

From this more sober perspective, Vasnetsov’s icon paintings now looked less like windows onto heaven than mirrors reflecting back the angst of the *fin-de-siècle* era—what Sergei Bulgakov called “the religious sentiment of a rebellious century, passing

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<sup>23</sup> Dmitrii Filosofov, “Ivanov i Vasnetsov v otsenke Aleksandra Benua,” *Mir iskusstva*, vol. 6, no. 10 (1901): 217–33 (228).

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandr Benua, “Otvét g. Filosofovú,” *Mir iskusstva*, vol. 6, nos. 11–12 (1901): 301–09 (307–08).

<sup>25</sup> Aleksandr Benua, *Istoriia russkoi zhivopisi v XIX veke* (St. Petersburg: Znanie, 1901), 129.

<sup>26</sup> This was Diaghilev’s verdict on Vasnetsov’s paintings for the Russian chapel at Darmstadt. See “Vystavka ‘Soiuz russkikh khudozhnikov’ v Moskve,” *Mir iskusstva*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1904): 7.

through the crucible of doubts.”<sup>27</sup> For Bulgakov, it was the “disturbing and passionate nature of their religious feeling” that gave these modern icons such an irresistible power over contemporary people.<sup>28</sup> Through the speaking glances and portrait-like features of Vasnetsov’s sacred personages, “the psychology of religious feeling, alive and consequently to a great extent individual” ultimately tipped the scale against the universality the artist had sought in his study of Byzantine and Russian icons.<sup>29</sup>

As the appetite for “real” icons from Russia’s medieval past intensified, the elements of visual and psychological realism that Vasnetsov had employed to engage easily distracted modern viewers now seemed obstacles to genuine religious feeling. Prayer required time to focus, to still the eyes and the mind, and as writer Dmitrii Trenev pointed out, “the simplicity and depth of religious feeling found in the so-called Rublev style” were ideally suited to this goal.<sup>30</sup> Before Vasnetsov’s Madonnas and saints, by contrast, “the gaze slides across all these details and as a result [the viewer] is disinclined to prayer.” However impressive their artistic qualities, Trenev concluded, Vasnetsov’s hybrid images failed in their function as prayer icons.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, “Vasnetsov, Dostoevskii, Vl. Solov’ev, Tolstoi. (Paralleli),” *Literaturnoe delo* (St. Petersburg: Tip. Kallinskogo, 1902), 120–23.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>30</sup> Dmitrii K. Trenev, *Ikonostas tserkvi sv. Ioanna Bogoslova pri tekhnicheskome zheleznodorozhnom uchilishche v gorode Borisoglebske. Sovremennaia friaz’* (Moscow: L.V. Dem’ezova, 1905), 17.

<sup>31</sup> Trenev, *Ikonostas tserkvi sv. Ioanna*, 17. For Vasnetsov’s critics, the falsity of his images was all the more striking because he was one of the first artists to collect and appreciate pre-Petrine icons. Forty-four of the one hundred and ten icons exhibited at the 1911 exhibition of early icons in St. Petersburg were from Vasnetsov’s collection. See *Vystavka ikonopisi i khudozhestvennoi stariny* (St. Petersburg: Sinodal’naia Tipografiia, 1911–12).

As his correspondence shows, Vasnetsov was fully alive to the challenges he faced in sharing his lofty spiritual ideals with a contemporary public seeking distraction “so as to fill the terrible emptiness of their souls.”<sup>32</sup> The construction of the Abramtsevo church remained for him a life-long ideal of collective creativity in the spirit of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—although “in those days this enthusiasm nurtured whole towns, districts, countries, peoples, whereas here it’s only our little friendly Abramtsevo art family and circle.”<sup>33</sup> In the thick of his work on St. Vladimir Cathedral he had a keen sense of alienation from those sectors of modern Russian society for whom, as Bulgakov put it, “a state of naïve faith has already become alien and impossible.”<sup>34</sup> As public opinion turned against him, and as the revolutionary events of 1905 called old values into question, Vasnetsov came to see himself as a man of Old Rus’ in retreat from the “spiritual decadence” of New Russia.<sup>35</sup> By 1913, when the Romanov Dynasty celebrated its tercentenary, his allegiances were solidly conservative, even reactionary.<sup>36</sup> For a new generation of icon lovers, he was unequivocally a man of the nineteenth century whose aesthetic prejudices blinded him to the icon’s true beauty.

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<sup>32</sup> See Vasnetsov’s letter to Elizaveta Mamontova, 27 October 1889, cited in *V. M. Vasnetsov. Pis’ma. Dnevnik. Vospominaniia*, 82–83. <http://vasnecov.ru/?type=page&page=c32f9dca-4d53-4bbe-9c52-764b7664159e&item=4d9eb913-0ffe-4846-b231-0c70db76aff0> (accessed 1 August 2018).

<sup>33</sup> From Vasnetsov’s 1918 tribute to Savva Mamontov, in Vsevolod S. Mamontov, *Vospominaniia o russkikh khudozhnikakh* (Moscow: Izd. Akademii Khudozhestv SSSR, 1950), 66. An English translation appears in this volume of *Experiment*.

<sup>34</sup> Bulgakov, “Vasnetsov, Dostoevskii, Vl. Solov’ev, Tolstoi. (Paralleli),” 120–23.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Vladimir V. Stasov, 16 April 1906, in *V.M. Vasnetsov. Pis’ma. Dnevnik*, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Vasnetsov’s strong monarchist sympathies and revulsion at the 1905 Revolution brought him into contact with the Union of the Russian People. He was also an active member of the Society for the Renaissance of Artistic Rus’ (Obshchestvo Vozrozhdeniia Khudozhestvennoi Rusi), created in 1915 to promote patriotic values.

Vasnetsov's precipitous demotion from national genius to "the ranks of the mediocre and mistaken" has become a familiar trope in the story of Russian art's shift from the margins of modernism to its avant-garde center.<sup>37</sup> But this story becomes more complicated when the focus expands to encompass more capacious definitions of modernism than the evolution of a mostly secular easel painting. As Eleonora Paston has pointed out, Vasnetsov was "an artist about whom people think and argue in terms of 'great art,' while on the other hand he belongs to mass culture and is exceedingly close to the most uneducated tastes."<sup>38</sup> While the artistic elite came to reject his icon paintings as false and banal, the Orthodox population at all social levels embraced them as authentic modern icons, no less imbued with spiritual presence than the Viatka Savior. Widely reproduced in luxury albums, cheap chromolithographs, and popular periodicals, Vasnetsov's images of Christ, the Mother of God, and selected saints became prototypes for unlimited copying, like any true icon. His Christ Pantocrator was among the approved subjects provided to students in the schools of the Society for the Guardianship of Icon Painting created in 1901. His two signature Mother of God icons from the apse and iconostasis of St. Vladimir Cathedral were among the most popular icons of the late Imperial period, as evidenced by the surprising number that have survived. And, in spite of his concerted efforts to ban the mechanical reproduction of icons on tin, his image of Saint Olga was pirated in just this way by the Moscow firm of Zhako and Co. to satisfy a huge public demand (**Fig. 6**).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sergei Makovskii, "V. Vasnetsov. Pereotsenka Vasnetsova," in *V.M. Vasnetsov. Pis'ma. Dnevnik*, 250.

<sup>38</sup> Eleonora Paston, "Paradoksy Viktora Vasnetsova," *Nashe nasledie*, vol. 4, no. 22 (1991): 7.

<sup>39</sup> Vasnetsov was a member of the Society for the Guardianship of Russian Icon Painting, founded in 1901. See

Vasnetsov's letter of 14 November 1901 to Count Sergei Sheremet'ev describing the extent of the tin icon's threat to

It is in this context that we might consider the four icons he sent to Paris in 1900: not as embarrassing failures of taste on the eve of the discovery of true icons, but as utopian experiments in line with the Abramtsevo circle's desire to mend what was broken in Russian society through a synthesis of past and present, faith and art, people and intelligentsia. Awkwardly displayed in the Grand Palais's "temple of art," these copies of icons blessed for prayer bore only a superficial resemblance to the "modern Madonna art" of William-Adolph Bouguereau, Carl Muller, or Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret.<sup>40</sup> A more sympathetic milieu for them would have been the little wooden chapel near the Palais de Trocadéro, designed by Konstantin Korovin to house contemporary kustar church art and icons by Mstera, Palekh, and Kholui painters. It was to these peasant painters and their far-flung public, rather than to the denizens of the art world, that Vasnetsov ultimately proved most successful in spreading his message of reconciliation and revival.

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Painted icons and the lack of any legal protection for his own images against machine reproduction, in *V.M. Vasnetsov. Pis'ma. Dnevnik*, 190–91.

<sup>40</sup> On Vasnetsov's peers in the field of religious art, see Estelle May Hunt, *The Madonna in Art* (Boston: L.C. Page & Co., 1897).