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Book Review

### *The History of the Discovery and Study of Russian Medieval Painting*

Gerol'd I. Vzdornov, Valerii G. Dereviagin, trans., and  
Marybeth Sollins, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 426 pp., illus.

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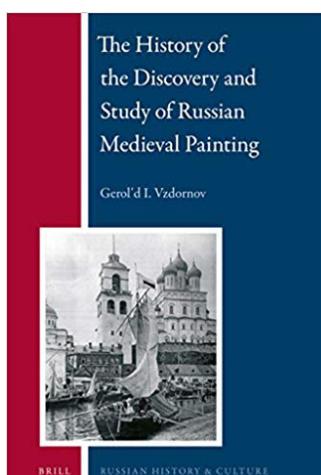
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## The History of the Discovery and Study of Russian Medieval Painting

Gerol'd I. Vzdornov, Valerii G. Dereviagin, trans., and Marybeth Sollins, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 426 pp., illus.

The Dutch publisher Brill is to be congratulated for publishing a superb English translation of Gerold I. Vzdornov's 1986 seminal study of the nineteenth century's discovery and study of Russian medieval icons and frescoes within imperial Russia that was commissioned by the Bronze Horseman Literary Agency in New York. Well known to art historians and historians of medieval and early modern Russia and Ukraine, Vzdornov's prolific work is less familiar to historians and students of the modern era. The welcome English version of one of his encyclopedic and beautifully illustrated monographs – involving an initial translation by Valery G. Dereviagin, which was then checked by Yury Pamfilov and edited by Marybeth Sollins – should become a staple of every university library and essential reading for scholars and students interested in the history and culture of imperial Russia. Chief researcher at the Russian State Institute of Restoration, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and an Honorary Member of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts, Vzdornov has authored approximately 300 works. His erudition is breathtaking.

The evidence and conclusions of this monograph should shatter once and for all various preconceived notions that the destruction of Russian religious art began with the Bolshevik regime, that restoration work always involved modern understandings of the word “restoration,” and that Russian medieval painting was revered throughout the ages. When I agreed to review this work as a non-art historian, I naively expected from the table of contents that I would be reading about the systematic uncovering of unblemished artistic works of the medieval period through

the renovation of ancient churches, beginning with the 1840s work on the late eleventh-century frescoes of the Dormition Church in Kiev's Monastery of the Caves, the first monastic institution established in the Kievan Rus state. Instead, Vzdornov catalogues the disastrous ways in which early Rus paintings and frescoes were occasionally renewed over time through obliteration via whitewashing and overpainting according to the fashions of individual periods. Renovations became fairly regular only in the eighteenth century when the ancient panels of iconostases were replaced with new ones and either deposited in less important churches or were left to mold in sheds. In 1849 many twelfth-century murals in the Church of St. George in Staraja Ladoga were, in Vzdornov's words, "knocked off the walls, its walls plastered anew, and the remaining fragments whitewashed." (14) By the 1880s, frequent whitewashing and overpainting in the major Kremlin cathedrals had, according to Vzdornov, reduced old frescoes to "the work of an ordinary nineteenth-century house painter[!]" (215) When renovation and scientific method combined in the mid-nineteenth century to remove the original glazes or darkened drying oil on frescoes, more destruction of ancient artifacts ensued. Later technologies could not easily distinguish any new painting done in the aftermath of the cleaning from the original frescoes as the renovators had paradoxically applied their new appreciation for the old art by painting in the style of the original rather than conforming to contemporary tastes. In the late nineteenth century even the well-intentioned attempts of Vladimir Vasilevich Suslov to preserve twelfth-century frescoes in Pereslavl-Zalessky by removing them and storing them in special mortar that fit snugly in fifty wooden crates were for naught because he was unable to convince a museum or scientific academy to house them. The storage of all but two crates in a barn guaranteed such rapid deterioration that in summer 1895 the containers and their contents "were disposed of in Lake Pleshchevo." (228) The only saving grace in these calamities of renovation and others like them lay in the occasional presence of mind on the part of restorers to have sketches made of the original murals.

At the same time that destructive renovations of medieval Russian and Ukrainian churches were being carried out, a variety of factors, according to Vzdornov, had paradoxically come together to champion a growing modern appreciation for medieval icons and frescoes, if not yet an appreciation of such works as being aesthetically pleasing. These factors included Romanticism's admiration for antiquities, Nicholas I's protectionist attitudes toward traditional Russian art, and the growing number of collectors of pre-Petrine artifacts from among wealthy Old Believers and Orthodox churchmen and laypersons. Eventually, some of that collecting would include antique icons from Byzantium, Mount Athos, and Egypt. At first the appreciation for medieval Russian art was limited to specialized restorers and private collectors, but by the late nineteenth century it was broadcast to a larger audience by way of the development of modern museums and public exhibits (through donations, bequests, and eventually systematic acquisitions), publications by enthusiasts and academic specialists, and works of fiction. By examining leading renovators and their projects as well as the endeavors of individuals, learned societies, and public institutions in nineteenth-century imperial Russia, Vzdornov provides a collective biography of persons both in the capital cities and the provinces who were part of an ever-growing civil society. They discovered Russian medieval art as an entity of its own separate from but inspired by Byzantine art.

Finally, Vzdornov critically analyzes the historiographical contributions of the early scholars on the subject.

Through the lens of art history Vzdornov delivers nothing less than a reinterpretation of late imperial Russian history and a chronicling of the destruction of much of ancient medieval Russian and Ukrainian art up through the turn of the twentieth century. It is little wonder that medievalists and early modernists often have to rely on surviving embroideries and manuscript illustrations to reconstruct the art and symbolism of their eras. Hopefully, Brill or another publisher will also publish translations of Vzdornov's work on the careful scholarly restoration projects of medieval and early modern Russian art works that occurred in the last decade of the imperial period as well as in the Soviet era by specialists who understood their aesthetic value.

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