RUSSIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND ORIENTALISM

Large-scale and versatile ardour for the East, born in Europe at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, can equally be ascribed to the Russian culture as well. Historically, however, the relationships of Russia and the East had their own peculiarities: its empire included nations that professed Buddhism and Islam, cultural proximity of ancient eastern tradition was an integral part of Russian self-consciousness. In Russia, where military developments unfolded directly at the borders of or on the territory of the empire, the interpretation of the eastern theme always possessed a great amount of “involvement”, a shade of personal participation and attitude.

In the Russian cultural tradition of the first half of the 19th century the East was associated with the Caucasus. The expansion of Russian borders conditioned not only the need for accounting and development of natural resources, drawing geographical maps of various territories or obtaining more specific information on those, but also the search for the principles of systematization of data about the peoples inhabiting those territories. That was exactly the period, when the application of photography was starting, for the purpose of acquisition of objective data in various branches of natural sciences and trustworthy fixation of national living was starting. The gradual spread of the technology of shooting on location made it possible to put together a visual description of one of the most interesting regions of Europe in ethnographic realm; the possibility of documentary communication emerged for the first time [1]. Painters of battle scenes, on high demand in the first half of the 19th century, gradually lose their ground. Only Vasilii Vereshchagin, an unsurpassed expert in reporting sketching and special immersion into history, customs, colours and flavours of the oriental world, works actively and paints from nature.

1851 saw the opening of the Caucasian Department of the Russian Geographic Society, founded in 1845 according to the high injunction of Emperor Nicholas I, and by and by a special Department of Photography under the General Staff of the Caucasian Army. Among the tasks of photographers, the graduates of the Military School of Topographers, where they acquired knowledge of the history, geography and geology of the Caucasus and photography, was filming of natural landscape, living and ways of life of various peoples. The names of many of those, who worked in the 50s and the 60s of the 19th century, remain unknown: submitting to the articles of war they did their work professionally and within the frameworks of their designated duties. There is no doubt that the new way of reality transmission was more accessible and inexpensive than the sketches of artists; and it met not only military interests, but was also directly related to scientific needs: naturalists, archaeologists and travellers turned to photography. It was exactly during that particular time that photographs and photography albums emerged: from popular daguerreotypes of the mountain views of the Caucasus of Sergey L’vovich Levitskii to whole photographic series — famous portraits of horsemen fighters (dzhigitis) of Andrei Ivanovich Denier, and landscape and architectural photographs of the lands around the Caspian Sea and the regions of Transcaucasia of such photographers as Petrov, Novikov and Edward Westly. One of the rare samples of “ethnographic” daguerreotypes of the prominent Austrian artist Josef Weninger, who operated in the mid 1840s in Petersburg, is kept in the Russian Ethnographic Museum: a group portrait of Kazakhs [2] (fig. 1).

In the 40s and 50s of the 19th century the first attempts at more systematic study of Central Asia were undertaken. One of the participants of the diplomatic embassy to Bukhara of 1841—1842, Nikolai Vladimirovich Khanykov, on his return authored a book titled “The Description of the Bukhara Khanate”, acknowledged as the best work in the scientific community and soon translated into English, German and French languages. In 1857 he noted in his substantiation of the scientific report planned that great scientific significance is assigned to historical, ethnographic and philological survey, which should have “consequences for success in science as well as in industry” [3]. In 1858 by order of the government the prominent orientalist headed the scientific mission to the Persian province of Khurāsān. At the same time a military and diplomatic mission of Colonel Nikolai Pavlovich Ignat’ev set out in 1858 to Khiva and Bukhārā. A specialist in photographic art, second lieutenant of artillery Anton Stepanovich Murenko took part in the mission. The album titled “From Orenburg to Bukhara via Khiva. The Photography of Second Lieutenant of Artillery Murenko”, which gathered together the materials of the expedition, the board of the Imperial Russian Geographical So-

Mitreuter, collaborating with the Dashkov Ethnographic Museum. The photographs, made on salted papers, were coloured with watercolours and placed in passe-partout, probably, by Maria Mitreuter, the owner of her own photographic studio; later she actually became the wife of the photographer. There is no doubt that the exhibition, for the first displaying such a vast panorama of life of various peoples of Russia, made its own contribution into the development of the Oriental theme in the Russian artistic tradition.

From the very establishment of Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum in 1902 in St. Petersburg (currently known as Russian Ethnographic Museum) attached great importance to the collection of documentary materials, first of all, photographs: collections on the cultures of the nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries number about 10,000 photographs (plate 1).

The museum collections have works of such notable photographers of the Caucasus as Vladimir (?) Barkanov, Alexander Karlovich Engel’, F. Hordet, and albums of Dmitrii Nikitin from the Caucasian front of 1877—1878, Dmitrii Ivanovich Ermakov (fig. 2), and of such scientists as Konstantin Alexandrovich Inos transt ev and Alexander Alexandrovich Miller. An unparalleled artistic image of the Caucasus at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a distinctive chronicle of human life of several generations was created by the oldest Russian photographer Ermakov, whose collection numbers about 1,200 photographs. Alexander Kazimirovich Serzhputovskii, who worked according to the program of A. A. Miller, set up in 1910—1911 in the regions of Western Daghestan, that are hard to access, among the peoples of Avarian language family was one of those men, to whom the world is greatly indebted — he documentarily confirmed the existence of small population ethnic groups, such as the Bezhta, the Hinukh, the Botlikh, the Karatins and other ones (figs. 3—4).

A significant role in political consolidation of Russia in Central Asia by means of getting acquainted with the Central Asian territories annexed in the 60s of the 19th century was played by the output of the combined publication — the “Turkestan Album”, prepared by the order of the Turkestan governor-general Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman, the abridged versions of two volumes and some individual pages are kept in the RME [8]. The album became an indicative event: materials published for a long time defined the principles of reflecting the life of people groups of Central Asia. The photographing was done by a group of photographers in the course of two years under the direction of Alexander Lud wigovich Kuhn, the orientalist researcher who served in the region of Turkestan; in 1872 the work was finished. It is known that the majority of photographs belong to photographer Nikolaï Nekhoroshev, the owner of a photographic studio in Tashkent, and to military photographer second lieutenant G. Krivcov, who mostly photographed views and patterns of Khiva and Khoqand. Four volumes of “Turkestan Album” (archaeological, ethnographical, enterprise and historical), containing over 1,200 photographs, were published in several copies (according to various sources...
there were three, four, six and seven, as well as it is known about mini versions, intended for scientific purposes), and represented the Russian Department of the Parisian International Geographical Exhibition of 1875 [9] (figs. 5—6).

The principles of photographing, developed by the creators of the “Turkestan Album”, found their extension in unique works made by a remarkable photographer (an artist by training), well-known researcher, the founder of the methodology of ethnographic photography, Samuel Martynovich Dudin, in the course of his travels to Central Asia in 1900—1902 (the museum’s collection numbers over 1,800 of his photographs). In his concluding work on the subject of ethnographic photography the scholar noted that

The art of S. M. Dudin stands out on account of its documentality, accuracy and artistic expressiveness in communicating the bright world of the culture of nomads, craftsmen and the peculiar oriental fragrance.

A special role of photography as a phenomenon, which records and reflects certain reality (over 200 photographers and photographic studios operated in the Caucasus and Central Asia before 1918) [11], determined the uniqueness of Russian museum collection as a mighty means of reflecting peculiarities of ethnographic diversity and peculiarity of Russia [12]. Photographic collections visibly confirm that the Russian society at large did not necessarily perceive the East as its colony. Documentary accuracy, high informational content, exceptional artistic expressiveness of photographic materials was largely defined by the communication of the visual environment, precisely located, and founded, first of all, upon the brilliant knowledge of cultures and traditions of people groups, where Muslim images organically neighboured with the Christian world.

Notes


2. RME, I. Weninger, call No. 3918-1.


4. S. A. Morozov, Russkie puteshestvenniki-fotografy (Russian Travelling Photographers) (Moscow, 1953), pp. 7—13, 43—49.

5. V. V. Stasov, Fotografiiia i graviura (Photography and Gravure) (St. Petersburg, 1856).


8. RME, call Nos. 3921, 5434, 10128.


12. These are collections preserved today in Kunstkamera (MAE RAS), RME, Russian Geographic Society, Institute for the History of Material Culture of RAS, National Library Of Russia.

Illustrations

Front cover:

Fig. 4
БАЗАРНАЯ ПЛОЩАДЬ Г. АУЛА-АТА.

Fig. 5
Inside the text:


Fig. 4. Idem, At the Hitching Post. Gelatin print. Karatins, 1911. Materials of the expedition by Division of the Russian Museum of Ethnography to Daghestan, the Andean region. RME, call No. 2371-5. Courtesy of the Museum.

Fig. 5. Market Square in the City of Awliya-ata. Imprint on salt paper. 1860—70-ies. Folio from the “Turkestan Album”. RME, call No. 5434-40. Courtesy of the Museum.