LESSON PLAN

Russian Culture through Art: Understanding Women’s Lives

Featuring Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky
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Grade Level Elementary

Overview
Russian art opens up a fascinating world of history and culture. This lesson offers the audience an invitation to share and experience these events by presenting the artwork of Konstantin Makovsky, a Russian nineteenth century painter, who was famous for his portraits of women in Russian national costumes. An examination of Makovsky's paintings will allow the audience to explore the history of women in Russia, and to learn about the historical status of women and their social, cultural, and intellectual influence on Russian society.

Anticipatory Set
• Konstantin Makovsky was a master history painter, with many of his painting depicting an idealized view of Russian life prior to Peter the Great's modernization of Russia. Today, his portraits are some of his most recognized and sought after works.
• Makovsky's painting Russian Beauty with a Cat (1865) is a favorite of many who visit The Joslyn Art Museum.
• Students will be asked to define the portrait as a kind of painting. In Makovsky's time only painters with a great deal of skill could make portraits come to life as he did.
• We will discuss Makovsky's original composition, attention to detail, the realistic depiction of the subject's costume, and the decorative elements of the painting's background.

Objectives
• Students will learn to examine a portrait
• Students will learn to recognize elements of the Russian national costume and lifestyle
• Students will investigate the peculiarities of Makovsky's art
• Students will explore other paintings by Makovsky and get important insights into Russian women's history

Resources
• Konstantin Makovsky – http://www.wikiart.org/en/konstantin-makovsky#close
• Joslyn's Makovsky Teaching Poster & powerpoint presentation - http://goo.gl/vGm2lH

Lesson Outline

Viewing and examining K. Makovsky's Russian Beauty and Cat (Group activity, 15 minutes)
1. Discussing a Russian national costume is depicted in the painting
2. How does the painting (the costume and the surroundings) reflect the subject's social status?
3. Exploring the ethnic details of the painting's background and the decorative elements used in the depiction of the house.
4. What makes this portrait so attractive and magical? Why do you feel so close to the girl?
5. What aspects of the painting highlight the beauty of the subject?
Women in Russia (16th-17th centuries): Exploring K.Makovsky's art (power point presentation and discussion of paintings, 45 minutes)

1. Medieval Russian marriage. Discussion of engagement and wedding customs. Family dynamics. The ideal Russian wife as promoted by Russian Orthodox teachings. Why was the wedding not exciting but sad and upsetting for Russian women?

**Paintings by Makovsky:** *Boyar's Wedding Feast, The Russian Bride's Attire, Boyaryshnya*

2. The view of the Russian Orthodox church on women's role in the family and society.

**Paintings by Makovsky:** *Woman Spinning Thread, Woman Making Lace*

3. *Terem* – seclusion of aristocratic women in their homes; seclusion as a mark of honor. *Terem* is attributed to the growth of misogyny as suggested by the Orthodox church.

**Paintings by Makovsky:** *The Boyarina, Boyarina by the Window, The Russian Bride's Attire*


**Paintings by Makovsky:** *From the Everyday Life of the Russian Boyar in the Late XII century, Portrait of a Girl, Woman in a Russian Dress, Girl with a Sheaf, A Goblet with Mead*

5. How did the Russian national costume style develop? What did it represent?

**Paintings by Makovsky:** *Portrait of Zinada Yusupova; Russian Beauty with Kokoshnik, A Girl in a National Costume, A Young Boyarina, Russian Beauty Wearing a Kokoshnik*

6. Did the Russian society value women highly?

**Academic Standards**
Available on online version at [www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/](http://www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/) [select Lesson Plans, then European]

**About the Artwork**
Best known as a painter of peasant scenes and founding member of the revolutionary movement known as the “Wanderers,” Makovsky established himself early on as a champion of Russian subject matter. Entering the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg — the only avenue for aspiring artists in the tightly controlled Czarist state — in 1858, Makovsky took an active part in an unprecedented rebellion against the authorities in 1863 and, with thirteen other students, formed the Artel’ Khudozhnikov, an independent artists’ cooperative. The Artel’ advocated freedom from Academic rules and subject matter and saw themselves as part of a new moral and rational order.

*Russian Beauty and Cat* perfectly embodies the modified realism and dawning nationalism of mid-century Russian artists. A carefully painted Tartar woman leans out an ornately carved window frame. The elaborate jewelry of her adornments contrasts with the softness of her face and bare shoulders — slightly sensual note accentuated by the contented, purring cat that she strokes.

**IMAGE:** Konstantin Makovsky, (Russian, 1839–1915), *Russian Beauty and Cat*, 1865, oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 36 1/2 in., Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Martin, 1954.172
Russian Culture through Art: Women in Russia (16th - 17th centuries)
Presented by Dr. Tatyana Novikov, Professor of Russian Studies, UNO

Featuring Konstantin Makovsky’s Art
K. Makovsky was an influential Russian artist, who captured the essence of everyday life in Russia’s past.

- He was born to a prominent family of artists and musicians.
- Makovsky was a master history painter, with portraits being some of his most recognized works today.
- He created beautiful portraits of women in Russian national costumes.
Makovksy portrayed an idealized view of Russian past

- His portraits of women in distinctive national costumes are adorned in beautiful garments and jewels.
- Their traditional headdress, a kokoshnik, is adorned with intricate embroidery and delicate pearls cradle their forehead.
- Married women covered their hair, but maidens had their braids to the side.
- Women wore loose pinafore style dresses with straps. They were worn by girls and married women from boyars (titled aristocracy) and merchants’ families to peasant women.
The adoption of the Byzantine Orthodoxy (988AD) promoted the growth of patriarchal system. Women were associated with sin and evil.

Simultaneously developed the notion of the extreme superiority of the masculine sex over the feminine.

Such opinions about women strengthened the power of the husband over the wife in patriarchal families.
Marriage was a business arrangement between families by “buying and selling.” The girl had no right to an opinion of her own, no choice. The bride and groom almost never saw each other until the wedding. In all social orders, the parents concluded marriages for their children. Parents, particularly fathers, had absolute control over the fate of their children, and daughters were obliged to submit themselves entirely to their fathers.
Marriages were concluded exclusively among believers

- Marriages with persons of other faiths were deemed “unworthy.”
- The church permitted no more than two marriages.
- An exception allowed a third marriage, if no children had been born of the first two.
- On the wedding day, the bride awaited the groom at her parents’ home.
- The day before, her dowry had been brought to the groom’s house, and the groom and his relatives had sent marital gifts to the bride’s family.

Makovsky. The Russian Bride’s Attire
In all wedding songs, the bride constantly laments

- She laments that she has to leave her family; that she is to be taken to a “far off, distant country,” to live in an “unknown family.”

Makovsky. From the Everyday Life of a Russian Boyar in the Late XVII Century
All marriages were arranged by parents

- Marriages took place at parents’ insistence.
- People were obliged to marry within their social order.

Makovsky. Boyar’s Wedding Feast
The dowry was the property of the husband, and the wife herself was the principal item of that property.

There was a custom by which the father took a lash and struck his daughter saying: “My daughter, by these blows you recognize the authority of your father. Now this authority passes into other hands. In my stead you will be punished for disobedience by your husband.”

Makovksy. Boyarynya

Russian Beauty with a Kokoshnik
A wife could not divorce her adulterous husband

- The husband of an adulterous wife had not only the right but an obligation to divorce her.
- A husband who forgave his wife’s betrayal was himself punished by a fine.
- Under Orthodox canons, many lesser offenses by a wife were equated with adultery.

Tsar Mikhail is selecting a wife
The church did not exalt women’s role in the family and society

• Scriptural passages were invoked to demonstrate the inferiority of women.
• The ideal woman would have to be not only silent and submissive but also God-fearing, ascetically chaste, indifferent to her own welfare, and ready to fulfill any task for her husband.
• Church literature supported a concept of the ideal marriage, where the wife was “quiet,” “humble,” “silent,” and “submissive to her husband’s will.”

Makovsky. Woman in a Russian Dress
Marriage existed for the purpose of perpetuating the race

- The church and the society encouraged women to bear many children.
- “A wife is given to a man for a single purpose, to bear children.”
- Barrenness was viewed as a great misfortune, one of the most terrible punishments from God: “It is a great evil, if no children are born.”
- The greatest merit of a woman was her ability to give birth to children.
- Sterile wives spent all their time in prayer.

Makovsky. Boyarynya

Makovskiy. Zinaida Yusupova.
Sterile wives were often forced to divorce or take the veil.

- Divorce and a forced taking of the veil were especially frequent in the royal family.
- Tsarina’s sterility was considered a national calamity, and gave the subjects of the tsar the right to demand his divorce.
- Revolting scenes often accompanied the forced taking of the veil.
What was the terem?

- The terem made its appearance in the life of Russian women in the 16th century.
- It was a rear part of the house, or an upper part like an attic, where the women were confined in seclusion.
- The fence surrounding that part of the house was very high, so that the women could walk in the garden without being seen.
That period witnessed a sharp transition in the status of women.

The terem stood for seclusion, isolation. Behind terem walls, women were safe from attack and insult. Their visitors could be monitored.

Makovsky. Boyarynya by the Window.
Didactic literature reinforced the idealization of the secluded terem woman

- Russians did not respect women who were not locked up in a terem.
- Seclusion was a mark of honor.
- The terem, with its strict isolation of marriageable young women, was intended to keep them pure.

Makovsky. The Boyarynya
The secluded terem woman was meek and quiet, fearing to transgress the established norms of behavior.

The husband in the family was like the tsar in the state.

Unlike Western European nobles, Muscovites strictly preserved the separate quarters for men and women.
Domostroi

- Domostroi was a code of church rules regulating the life of the people.
- The directions it contained covered the whole of Russian life – spiritual, domestic, and social.
Noble girls were reared in the terem

Aristocratic girls were trained only to become wives. They had to be virtuous and submissive, first to their parents and later to their husbands. Young girls were carefully secluded in the women’s quarters of the house.

Makovsky. Portrait of a Girl in a Russian Dress

Makovsky. A Young Boyaryshnya
• Young women in Russia were a sort of currency with which nobility and wealth could be obtained.
• Virginity was one of the criteria for determining a girl’s value.
• A daughter of a boyar who had not “despoiled her virginity” might be successfully married to a nobleman, or even the tsar himself.
The minimum age for marriage – 15 for boys and 12 for girls – was often not observed. For the bride, the wedding was not exciting but sad and upsetting. It marked a leap into the unknown, a farewell to childhood.
For noble women, marriage meant continued seclusion in an unfamiliar household.

She was rarely permitted to go to church or into the society of her women friends. In a company of friends, she was permitted to talk only about needlework.
The women of the imperial family spent their days in their section of the palace. They spent almost all their time in prayer and needlework. The life of the tsar’s daughters resembled that of nuns.
Most people got up before dawn. At midday meal, the women did not sit at the table with the men; they ate afterward what the men left. After the meal, Russians were accustomed to relax and sleep. Women from the serf and urban classes had no time for recreation. They worked from morning to night, caring for livestock and tending vegetable gardens. In villages, women engaged in fishing and processing fish and caviar for storage.
The Domostroi recommended that the Muscovite housewife keep a large store of food at home – enough for the entire family for a year. Every day had its project: salting or pickling mushrooms or vegetables; smoking or drying meat or fish; pressing oil; churning butter; curing cheeses or sour cream; brewing beer and vodka. They also baked their own bread.
When guests came to visit, a hostess was obliged to serve a wide variety of dishes. She did not herself attend the reception of male visitors. It was the men’s feast.
The Domostroi defines respective duties of husband and wife

- The wife is to be kind, silent, hard-working, obedient, and she is to submit to physical punishment.
- And if the wife, the daughter, or the son pays no attention to the punishment, then the husband or the father can beat them with a lash.
- The Domostroi imposed a childish submission upon wives and dictated that women submit to the authority of their husbands.
- Literary texts of that period depict women as models of common sense, serenity, patience, and devotion.
The Domostroi recognized only the head of the house

Domostroi sanctioned in the senior absolute power, unrestrained freedom of will; and in the junior, submission and obedience, unlimited servility and complete childishness.
Seclusion deprived women of all possibility of developing intellectually.

- No one was permitted to see the tsar’s wife or daughters.
- Even the court physician was not permitted to see them.
- When the tsarina was ill, the physician had to feel the sick woman’s pulse, but he could not touch her bare hand.
- The higher the position of the woman’s husband, the closer was her seclusion.

Tsarina Natalia, wife of tsar Aleksei and mother of Peter the Great.
Upper-Class Women

The principal beauty of a woman consisted in her fleshiness. “May God make me fleshy; rosiness I can get for myself.” Rich Russian women of the 16th and 17th centuries spent their time in sleeping, eating, drinking, prayer, church service and pilgrimages to various convents.

Makovisky. Tea Drinking
In the 16th and 17th centuries, bright colors were in fashion.

- For the most intelligent women, there was the reading of the lives of the saints.
- There were amusements: music in its most crude and primitive forms.
- Next in importance were the puppet theater, bears with their trainers, rope dancers and the like.
- Drinking was popular and found its way to the terem, where the women drank like men.
The ideal female beauty among all orders of Russian society was tall, stately, and serene and fluid in movements.

To be beautiful, a woman was supposed to hold her head up proudly but cast her eyes down modestly.

Thinness and pallor were considered signs of illness or bad habits.
Women’s costume hid the contours of the figure under layers and folds of cloth and deemphasized waist and bosom. This style of dress reflected the perception of women’s place in society – a society in which women were desexed and subjugated. Women were objects to possess. The society did not value women highly.
A wife had no personality of her own

• Under the patriarchal system, a wife was brought up in slavery and stupefied by the family atmosphere.
• She was the property of her husband and could not wish for anything else.
• The patriarchal system attained its purpose in establishing the absolute autocracy of the husband; it made the woman servile, without any sense of dignity.

Makovsky. A goblet of meade
Did the terem secure a moral life in Russian society?

If the woman was subdued, the man on the contrary was put on a pedestal. He had an unrestrained and unlimited power, and he made use of both.

Makovsky. At the spinning Wheel
Could there be real love between husband and wife?

At best, there could be only humility and devotion on the part of the wife, and condescending patronage on the part of the husband.

Makovsky. Russian Beauty.

Makovsky. Alexandra
In Russia men were not gallant towards women

- Foreign travelers often noted that about Russian men.
- How could they be gallant, when even almost to the present time one could often hear a man repeat the proverb:
- “A hen is not a bird, and a woman is not a human being”? 

Makovsky. Russian girl with a sheaf
Discussion Questions for *Russian Beauty with a Cat* (1865)
Dr. Tatyana Novikov, Russian Studies Professor, University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. Identify features of distinctive Russian national dress. What elements are not typical?

2. What is the subject’s social status? Is she married?

3. Explore the ethnic details of her home: the decorative frame pattern of the *nalichniki* (the wood carved decorations around window frames); the bottom sill that the girl leans onto has beautifully carved carving detail, popular with Russian folk architecture; visible parts of the *izba* (large wooden homes). Is the window tall? Does her home show an upper class status? Construction of round log dwellings and the beautiful carving was done by a skilled craftsman for a family with the means to afford it.

4. The composition of the painting. Why do we feel the girl is so close we could reach out and touch her?

5. What aspects and details of the painting highlight the beauty of the girl?

6. What makes Makovsky’s art so realistic?

IMAGE: Konstantin Makovsky, (Russian, 1839–1915), *Russian Beauty and Cat*, 1865, oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 36 1/2 in., Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Martin, 1954.172