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Imaging Kyivan Rus' then and now, or how to look at Antin Losenko's *Vladmir and Rogneda*

Recorded in the *Primary Chronicle*, a manuscript compiled around 1113, the history of Kyivan Rus' constitutes an intangible heritage shared by the modern states of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.¹ Over the centuries, its lands had been conquered by Varangians, Mongols, Lithuanians, Poles, and Russians, and were known as the Principality of Kyiv, the Cossack Hetmanate, the Kyivan Rus', the Ukrainian State, and Ukraine. In the nineteenth century the history and national identity of Kyivan Rus' was turned into a battlefield, in which the rulers and producers of culture alike: theologians, historians, cartographers, poets, opera librettists, as well as artists and art historians, kept rewriting, remapping, and reimagining the lands of Rus'. The commanding voice belonged to imperial Russia which, in the words of Serhii Plokhyy, "claim[ed] Kyivan Rus' history for one indivisible Russian nation" in which Ukrainians and Belarussians were considered "mere subgroups".² Strategies of appropriation, and those of the reappropriation of Kyivan Rus', have been problematised by scholars active in the region and in the West, a process which had been put in motion by Mikhailo Hrushevskyy (Михайло Грушевський, 1866-1934) and has since been developed by a growing contingent of scholars, including Serhii Plokhyy, Donald Ostrovsky, Oleksyy Tolochko, Timothy Snyders, Steven Seegel, and Lubov Bazan.³

This text goes back to my old university course on Russian art under the Romanovs, when I adopted the imperial narrative then prevailing in anglophone literature. What follows below is an attempt of a belated revision of some of my approaches, which marginalised the complexity of the Ukrainian history, geography and its contribution to the arts of the Russian Empire. The article focuses on the eighteenth-century *Imperial Academy of Art in Saint Petersburg* and the invention of a pan-Russian historical iconography in which the story of Kyivan Rus' served as the myth of



Fig. 1 Anton Losenko, *Vladimir and Rogneda*, 1770, oil on canvas, 211,5 x 177,5 cm (St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum)

origin. The central figure was Volodymyr the Great (ca. 960-1050), the baptiser and unifier of the East Slavic lands, but also a violent conqueror, a fratricide, "insatiable in his vice", and "overcome by the lust for women", to cite *the Primary Chronicle*.⁴ He amended for his sins after his baptism, to be canonised as Saint Volodymyr, and has since been revered as the founder of both Ukraine and Russia.

I would like to discuss images attached to one story from Volodymyr's youth, when he was still a prince of Novgorod, namely his marriage to Rogneda, a daughter of Rogvolod, the Varangian Prince of Polotsk, and I will focus on the much-celebrated painting *Vladimir and Rogneda* by Ukrainian-born Antin Losenko (Антін П. Лосенко, 1737-1773), which won the Academy's membership competition in 1770.

It has since been celebrated as the founding image of the Russian school (fig. 1). It presents Volodymyr as an affectionate suitor who declares his love to Rogneda and is bowing gallantly before the fainting princess. In comparison, the various versions of *The Primary Chronicle* the painting had been based on offer a gruesome story of Volodymyr's brutal conquest of Polotsk, murder and rape, all in response to Rogneda's refusal of the marital union, because she had already been betrothed to his brother Yaropolk, the Grand Prince of Kyiv, and because of Volodymyr's illegitimate birth status.⁵ According to other versions of the *Chronicle*, their marriage produced many children but was tainted by Volodymyr's infidelities with hundreds of concubines. Moreover, his plans of conversion to Christianity involved marriage to Anna Porphyrogenita, a sister of Byzantine Emperor Basil. Rogneda, whose name was changed to Gorislava, attempted to stab him as he slept. Volodymyr then intended to kill her, but she was saved from execution by their son Iziaslav, and both were expelled from Kyiv back to Polotsk.⁶

Losenko's *Vladmir and Rogneda*, using the then dominant Russian version of Volodymyr's name, has been discussed in the context of Russian historiography, the origins of the national iconography promoted by the Imperial Academy of Art, of the relationship between history painting and eighteenth-century drama and literature, as well as the national costumes as markers of identity. The vexed issue of the rape and that of Losenko's Ukrainian ethnicity have hardly been considered so far.⁷ I will look at the changing ways in which *Vladmir and Rogneda* have been read in the past and could be read today. The painting was immediately successful because it complied with the requirements of the Academy to glorify Volodymyr, while putting blame on "haughty" and treacherous Rogneda. Today, however, its message appears ambiguous. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin's thesis on history as a constellation of past and present,⁸ I aim to identify counter-discourses that emerge in the process of a close visual analysis of this image by the contemporary viewer at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the name of "the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians",⁹ but also at the time of the "me-too" movement against sexual violence. I will be

using the Russian name "Vladimir" when discussing the painting and the Russian sources, and Ukrainian "Volodymyr" when referring to history.

As said above, from the outset *Vladimir and Rogneda* had been seen as the origin of Russian history painting. It won its author Antin Losenko a succession of lucrative positions, including the Professorship of the History Painting class at the Academy of Art in Saint Petersburg, followed by the directorship of this institution.¹⁰ At that time it was not unusual that the founder of the Russian school of painting was Ukrainian by birth. The Cossack Hetmanate, set up after the Cossack uprising against the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth on the eastern Bank of Dnipro in 1649, had remained in a political union with Tsarist Russia for more than a century. As argued by Plokyh, it was Kyivan theologians at the Cave Monastery (Kyievo-Pecherska Lavra) who played a central role in the construction of the common past shared by the Cossack Hetmanate and the Russian state. *The Kyivan Synopsis*, "the first printed textbook of Rus' history", was published in Kyiv in 1674.¹¹ In the eighteenth century the Ukrainian presence was felt in many spheres of life in the Russian Empire, including the highest echelons of the Tsarist administration, as well as culture. As established by Polly Blakesley, Ukrainian students formed also a distinct group in the Academy of Art.¹² Founded by Ivan Shuvalov in 1757 and developed under Catherine the Great, the Academy was set up on the French model. It constituted the first state institution in the lands of Russia which provided tuition in techniques of fine arts and architecture, introducing the western concept of art as *mimesis*, and with it the hierarchy of painting genres.¹³ In the academy's early years it was portraiture rather than history which was invested with the highest rank, and its most successful practitioners came from the Cossack Hetmanate, such as Dmitry Levitsky (Дмитро Левицький, 1735-1822), son of the priest and icon painter at the Cave Monastery Kyivo-Pecherska Lavra, and Vladimir Borovikovsky (Володимир Боровиковський, 1757-1825), also from a family of icon painters in Myrhorod.¹⁴ Antin Losenko, born into a Cossack family in Hlukhiv, had been sent to St. Petersburg in his infancy to sing in a court choir and owed his spectacular career of a painter to the Aca-

demy's patronage. Having graduated with a gold medal, he was granted long-term scholarships in Paris, where he was taught by Jean Restout the Younger (1692-1768), and then in Rome. All the way through he was educated, rewarded, and employed in the Russian Empire as a Russian artist. As noted by Blakesley:

[Vladimir and Rogneda] "may have been a typical neoclassical composition by a Ukrainian-born artist who had been educated by Frenchmen and had spent most of the previous decade living abroad. Nonetheless, Losenko's strong association with the Russian Academy, coupled with a Slavic iconography steeped in culturally coded references, were sufficient for his contemporaries to instantiate his painting as the cornerstone of a national school of art."¹⁵

Significantly, the story of Volodymyr and Rogneda was included by the Imperial Academy into the list of topics essential for the construction of the Russian national iconography. In St. Petersburg, as in other European art schools, the classical paradigm which reduced history painting to Greek and Roman topics, mythology and the Bible, had been increasingly displaced by the indigenous vernacular histories and iconographies. Importantly, a pressure to develop a specifically Russian historical genre echoed the calls for new books on the Russian past, which would invariably begin with the Kyivan Rus'.¹⁶ The patron of the Imperial Academy, Catherine the Great (1729-1796), took on the major role in the project, driven by the necessity to bolster her own political credentials after her contentious ascension to the throne in 1764. A recent study by Anna Korndorf examines in detail Catherine the Great's motivation to embrace the pre-Muscovy history of the East Slavic lands as the origins of Russian Tsardom and the Russian Empire. She commissioned that omniscient scholar, the scientist and historian Mikhail Lomonosov (Михаил Ломоносов, 1711-1765), to prepare a list of topics most appropriate for the visual representation of the Russian past. The Academy competitions for medals and posts provided opportunities to enforce those new themes, as it was the case with Volodymyr and Rogneda, chosen by the Academy council in 1769.¹⁷

The brief for students, drawn directly from the newly published *Old Russian History* by Lomonosov, specified the topic for the candidates:

"Vladimir, seeking to consolidate his Novgorod territories, sent to Rogvolod, Prince of Polotsk, to request the hand of his daughter Rogneda in marriage. Incensed by Rogneda's proud riposte, Vladimir mobilized all his forces, took the capital city of Polotsk by force and, after the lives of Rogvolod and two of his sons had been taken, was united in matrimony with the high-minded Rogneda against her will."¹⁸

According to an explanation of the project by the artist himself, an unusual document found by art historian Avraam Kaganovich in the Archives of the Imperial Academy, Losenko did his own substantial research in preparation for the competition.¹⁹ It copied descriptions of the Rogneda story from other historical sources, including *The Primary Chronicle* and *The Kyivan Synopsis*. Having arrived at a list of possible episodes, Losenko recorded in detail his thinking about the painting and the reasons why he thought that the emphasis on love and compassion on the part of Volodymyr, rather than on violence, seemed most suitable for the task. He wrote:

"I decided to choose just one topic, since the painting cannot show more than one moment in time. I represented Vladimir in such a way as to show the moment when, after his conquest of Polotsk, he saw Rogneda for the first time [...]. Vladimir is presented as the victor, while haughty Rogneda is his captive. The brief says that Vladimir married Rogneda against her will, which must have meant that he loved her. And that is why I presented him as a captivated suitor who, when seeing his woman dishonored and deprived of everything, consoles her, and repents in front of her, and not, as others have claimed, rapes her and marries her after that, which seems odd to me. But even if that was the case, my painting shows just their first encounter."²⁰

Losenko turned the scene of a brutal conquest and sexual violence into a confession of love, framing it according to the sensibilities of his time, which de-



Fig. 2 Rogvolod receives a messenger from Volodymyr and talks to his daughter Rogneda about his marriage proposal, miniature in the Radziwiłł Chronicle, ca. 1490, fol. 42



Fig. 3 Rogneda's attack on Volodymyr, miniature in the Radziwiłł Chronicle, ca. 1490, fol. 163

manded a figure of an honest sovereign, and the culpable, “haughty” bride. The latter was indicated in a longer title given to the painting by the Academy: *Grand Duke Vladimir Svyatoslavich before Rogneda, the daughter of Rogvolod Prince of Polotsk, after defeating the prince because of his disgusting refusal of Vladimir's demand to marry Rogneda*.²¹ The glorification of Volodymyr was the rule, and Rogneda had



Fig. 4 Volodymyr wants to execute Rogneda, but Iziaslav comes to her defense, miniature in the Radziwiłł Chronicle, ca. 1490, fol. 163

to share the fate of an army of women blamed for having been raped and for any other consequences of their refusal of a marital/sexual union, no matter how atrocious it would be.

Although the artist studied historical sources, there is no evidence that he knew the miniatures in the Radziwiłł manuscript of *The Primary Chronicle*, which contains 613 images, “the only set of imagery which we tend to associate with Kyivan Rus’”, as written by Tolochko.²² The *Radziwiłł Chronicle*, dated to the early 1490s, is probably a copy of a lost illuminated manuscript from the thirteenth century. It reached St. Petersburg in 1761 as a military trophy of the Seven Year's War (1758-1763) and has since been kept at the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences.²³ It includes three miniatures depicting the whole story of the encounters between Volodymyr and Rogneda. These are *Rogvolod receives a messenger from Volodymyr and talks to his daughter Rogneda about his marriage proposal*, *Rogneda's attack on Volodymyr*, followed by *Volodymyr wants to execute Rogneda, but Iziaslav comes to her defense* (fig. 2-4).²⁴

Losenko's composition had nothing to do with the old miniatures, and he provided an entirely novel reading of the story, a reading which seems to be adjusted to the rhetoric of a theatrical spectacle. The Academy had its own theatre, and Losenko's canvas, as reported by the early nineteenth-century source,

not only used a contemporary actor as his model for Vladimir, but he presented the event as if being enacted on a small stage, complete with artificial décor, heavy costumes, dramatic lighting, and expressive gestures denoting the moral conflict of the sovereign.²⁵ Love suited the task better than the massacre of Polotsk. Losenko's choice was applauded both by the Academy authorities and the St. Petersburg art-world. What won the highest accolade was his skill in merging the Western art vocabulary with Russian details of servants' dresses and faces, and hence the painter was heralded as a founding father of the Russian school. Another point was his artistry, for which he was named a "Russian Raphael". Contemporary poets, such as Gavrilla Derzhavin (Гавриил Державин, 1743-1816), wrote verses about the painting, and his fellow artists, including the French sculptor Etienne Maurice Falconet (1716-1791), working on the equestrian statue of Peter the Great, commended his skills to Catherine the Great. She visited Losenko's studio and included *Vladimir and Rogneda* as one of the first Russian paintings acquired for her Hermitage collection.²⁶

Losenko's *Vladimir and Rogneda* preceded the publication of the lists of recommend subjects from the Russian past to be treated by artists, such the one compiled by Alexander Pisarev (Александр Писарев, 1780-1848) in 1807.²⁷ It also came before the poet Nikolai Karamzin's (Николай М. Карамзин, 1766-1826) claim of 1802, appealing to the Academy students to address national themes: "May they bear witness all over Russian to the greatness of the country's ancient forebears! May we see her history in pictures displayed in the halls of the Imperial Academy of Arts".²⁸ Karamzin's colossal *History of the Russian State* in 12 volumes was commissioned by Tsar Alexander I (1777-1825) and published between 1816 and 1827. As noted by Steven Seegel, it was modelled on Edward Gibbon's monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88), but it focused solely on the "rise" of Russia.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Kyivan Rus' was presented as the cradle of the Russian lands, and Ukraine and Belarus were barely mentioned.³⁰ Karamzin's history was accompanied closely by Ivan Akhmatov's (Иван Ахматов, 1766-1829) lavish historical *Atlas of the Russian*

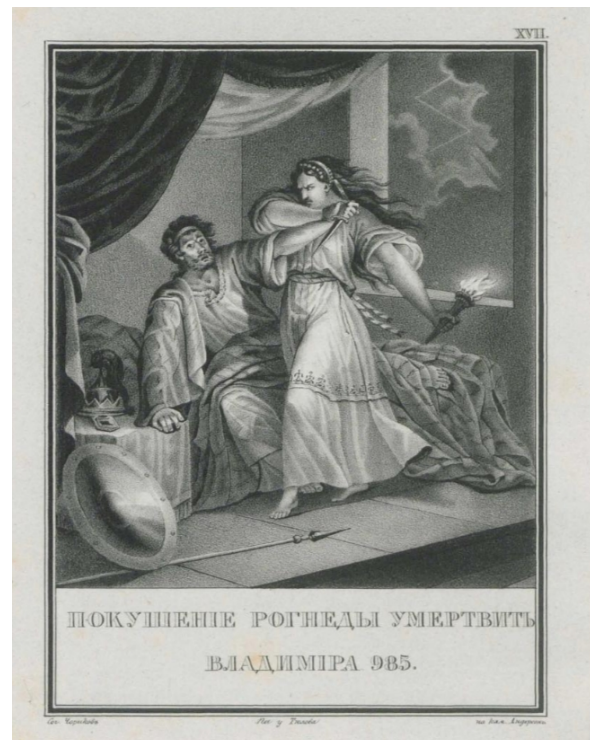


Fig. 5 Boris Artemevich Chorikov, *Rogneda attempts to kill Vladimir, 985*, wood engraving in: *Zhivopisnyi Karamzin, ili Russkaia Istorია v' kartinakh*, ed. by Andrei Prevo, part 1, St. Petersburg 1836, pl. XVII.

State, which appeared between 1821 and 1831, with heavily annotated maps testifying to an unimpeded growth of the Russian Empire. The legend of the map devoted to Vladimir the Great's reign includes a story of Rogneda as narrated in Karamzin but emphasising the attempted killing.³¹ Another edition of Karamzin's history, abridged and published with prints, *Illustrated Karamzin, or Russian History in Pictures*, completed the process of coining the historical iconography and cartography of the Russian past.³²

The story of Rogneda featured in all of them described, depicted and mapped (fig. 5).³³ The recommended episode, however, was no longer the enforced marriage and the destruction of Polotsk, but the last two scenes: *Rogneda's failed attempt to kill Volodymyr in revenge for her father's and brothers' lives and for his adultery*, as well as *Volodymyr's act of magnanimity* which turned Rogneda's execution into exile, the latter added to later editions of *Illustrated Karamzin*. From the nineteenth century onwards, those two episodes would dominate both visual representations, as seen on a canvas by Sergei Gribkov



Fig. 6 Sergei Gribkov, *Vladimir and Rogneda*, 1884, oil on canvas, 217 X 177 cm (The Ivanovo State Museum of Local History)

(Сергей Грибков, 1822-1893) (fig. 6),³⁴ but also in stories, poems and opera librettos.³⁵ Volodymyr would now inhabit the identity of an unsuspecting husband who defends himself against an irrational woman, but whose inner wisdom and magnanimity makes him pardon her. Rogneda, by contrast, in Shkandrij's words, "a female counterpart to the Mazepa myth [...], plays upon imperial fears of an undomesticated, imperfectly assimilated conquest and an ever-present threat of treason [...]. The focus is usually on the astonishing depth of deception."³⁶

Let us return to Losenko's painting (fig. 1) and look at it closely rather than read what has been written about it. While the demeanour of Vladimir exudes honesty, Rogneda is distressed and aloof. The surrounding figures, however, have different stories to tell: the face of a grieving mother hidden in the shadow behind Rogneda is clearly juxtaposed to Vladimir's pleads of love, not allowing the viewer to forget about the atrocities he has just committed. The watchful gaze of the kneeling servant expresses anxiety about Rogneda's future, reinforced by the gesture of her hands clasped in apprehension in front of her.³⁷ A sol-

dier whispering to his companion behind Vladimir's back joins the chorus of the secondary figures which appear to be proclaiming an imminent tragedy.

Is this just a conjectural reading of the contemporary viewer, activated by the present events?

Inevitably, the painting acquires a host of new meanings when we look at it through the prism of the current Russian war in Ukraine. Putin's "rationale" for the invasion echoes Catherine the Great's, as well as Karamzin's views on exclusive Russian ownership of the ancestry of the Kyivan Rus'. Putin's aspirations to Volodymyr's heritage, specifically, are motivated by the search for his own political "genealogy" in order to legitimize his territorial claims and ensuing war crimes. Walter Benjamin aimed to disband precisely this kind of teleological historicism, and his thesis that "the consciousness of the present [...] explodes the continuum of history" seems very apt in this case. As he claimed repeatedly, the past and present are inter-related, and so are image and word.

"Works of art teach [...] how their function outlives their creator and how his intentions are left behind. They demonstrate how the reception of the work by its contemporaries becomes a component of the effect which a work of art has upon us today. They further show that this effect does not rest in an encounter with the work of art alone but in an encounter with the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age."³⁸

And later, "image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill."³⁹

Let us look at the painting as an image of "what has been" which unleashes the constellations of images of "the now" that flash and clash with the past, twisting the meanings of both. The surge of media photographs, revealing the atrocities of the war in Ukraine, the horrific evidence of torture, the destruction of cities and sites of memory, of the ruined museums, tower blocks, rail stations, villages, as well as those of military leaders, soldiers, raped women and mourning families, provide an unending constellation of images which come together in a flash with

those of the past conflicts, the wars fought in the same territory, their leaders, soldiers, and violated civilians. It is difficult to shake them off while looking at Losenko's *Vladimir and Rogneda* today.

The first clash, and the first question which comes to mind, is to what extent could the figure of Vladimir stand for Vladimir Putin, as the latter implied when he raised, during the first phase of the war with Ukraine, the monumental statue of Saint Vladimir in front of the Kremlin in 2016.⁴⁰ Clearly, there are many issues with such an identification. At present, Putin's heritage is overshadowed by, if not reduced to, conquest, rape, war atrocities, associations with war criminals, and military alliances with dictators.⁴¹ Moreover, the long-standing political alliances with Europe that Volodymyr the Baptiser was so efficient about, cannot be attributed to Putin's name, but rather to the Ukrainian leader.⁴²

But perhaps what matters more is the shifting identity of Losenko's Rogneda. Could she stand for today's Ukraine? Or, for Belarus? And further, what is Rogneda's heritage today? Is it arrogance, deception and treason, or even responsibility for the murder of her father and brother, and for the destruction of Polotsk? The Russian cultural industry is very eloquent on this topic. The film *Viking* of 2016 about Volodymyr and his life before and after his conversion to Christianity shows Rogneda, in no uncertain terms, as a haughty foreigner, a Varangian princess who, having had a temerity to reject Volodymyr, was duly raped by him in front of her parents and all his companions. The film presents her, as if confirming Shkandrij's conclusion above, as a traitor and sex-maniac, mad with jealousy and a desire for revenge.⁴³

But, she could also be seen as a princely daughter, a victim of rape, and the mother of the rulers of Belarus, as the Self rather than the Other? This is how Rogneda is presented on the commemorative coin of Belarus, issued by the National Bank of the Belarus Republic in 2006 (fig. 7).⁴⁴ The medieval town of Iztaslav (today Zaslavl/Заслаўе), the place of her exile, features on its obverse, while the revers shows Rogneda as a teenage girl, standing next to her father. An explanation of the coin for collectors, in Belarussian and English, gives a summary of their



Fig. 7 Svetlana Zaskevitch, *Rogvolod of Polotsk and Rogneda*, 2006, commemorative coin, National Bank of Belarus

lives based on the *Primary Chronicle*. It does not absolve Volodymyr of his crimes and states that after her return Rogneda took a monastic vow under the name Anastasiia, and that after her death she was venerated as a saint by the inhabitants of Polotsk.⁴⁵ Today a contemporary statue devoted to her stands in Zaslavl, by which she is represented together with her son, who is ready to defend his mother against wrongdoers.

For the contemporary viewer of the painting at the time of the “me-too” movement there is clearly more to Rogneda than the Russian cultural industry wants to see. No matter how many authors would explain and justify Volodymyr's rape and murder by blaming Rogneda, who dared to say “no” at a time when women had no rights to oppose dynastic choices, her story matters as much as history.

Endnotes

1. *Primary Chronicle*, also known as *Tale of Bygone Years*, is a history of Kyivan Rus' from ca. 850 to 1110, probably compiled in Kyiv, and preserved in several manuscripts which slightly differ from each other, some of them illustrated. For the collation of the texts of the five main versions, see: *Pověst' vremennykh lét: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, 3 vols., ed. by Donald Ostrovsky, Cambridge, MA 2004.
2. Serhii Plokhly, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 1-2.
3. Mikhailo Hrushevskiy, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, 10 vols., Edmonton 1997-2021 (The Hrushevsky translation project). Plokhly 2006 (as note 2). Serhii Plokhly, *The Frontline: Essays on Ukraine's Past and Present*, Cambridge, MA 2023. Lubov Bazan, *A History of Belarus: A Non-Literary Essay That Explains the Ethnogenesis of the Belarussians*, London 2014. Олексі́й П. Толочко, *Очерки начальной Руси* [Oleksij P. Tolochko, Sketches of Early Russia], Kyiv 2015. Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*, New Haven, CT 2008. Steven Seegel, *Mapping Europe's Borderlands: Russian Cartography in the Age of Empire*, Chicago London 2012. Art history is mostly preoccupied with modern and contemporary eras, see: Myroslava Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in the Ukraine*, Ann Arbor, MI 1986 (Studies in the fine arts/The avant-garde, 50). Myroslav Shkandrij, *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine: Contested memory*, Boston, MA 2019. Myroslav Shkandrij, *Challenging the 'nationalist' moniker: Ukraine's narrative, Russia and the West*, in: Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, vol. 28, no. 3, 2022, pp. 351-361. *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art: Political and Social Perspectives*, ed. by Svitlana Biedarieva, Stuttgart 2021 (Ukraine Voices, 14). Andrey Kurkov et al., *Treasures of Ukraine: A Nation's Cultural Heritage*, London et al. 2022.
4. *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, translated and ed. by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, Cambridge, MA [1953], pp. 91-126, esp. p. 94 (Publication/The Mediaeval Academy of America, 60).
5. Ibidem, p. 91. Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs 900-1700*, Ithaca and London 1989, pp. 38-39, 234, refers to the text of the *Novgorod IV Chronicle* which reports on Volodymyr's rape of Rogneda: *Полное собрание русских летописей* [Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles], vol. 4, St. Petersburg 1848, Part 1, вып. I, pp. 53-55. See also: N. L. Pushkareva, *Women in the medieval Russian family of the tenth through fifteenth centuries*, in: Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation, ed. by Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel and Christine D. Worobec, Berkeley 1991, pp. 29-43.
6. The Russian Primary Chronicle 1953 (as note 4), p. 242. See also: Francis Butler, *The "Legend of Gorislava" (not "Rogned" or "Rogneda"): Ad edition, commentary, translation*, in: Dubitando: Studies in History and Culture in Honor of Donald Ostrowski, ed. by Brian H. Boeck, Bloomington, IN 2012, pp. 335-352. On various interpretations of Rogneda's story in literature and opera, see: Myroslav Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times*, Montreal and Kinston 2001, pp. 86-89. Инна Булкина, *О случаях и характерах в российской истории: Владимир и Рогнеда* [Inna Bulkina, On Cases and Characters in Russian History: Vladimir and Rogneda], in: И время и место: историко-филологический сборник к 60-летию Александра Львовича Осповата [And Time and Place: Historical and Philological Collection for the 60th Anniversary of Alexander Lvovich Ospovat], Moscow 2008, pp. 84-96. Виктория В. Ткаченко, *Владимир и Рогнеда в историографии и искусстве второй половины XVIII в.* [Viktorija V. Tkachenko, Vladimir and Rogneda in Historiography and Art of the Second Half of the 18th Century], in: Платоновские чтения: материалы и доклады XXII Всероссийской конференции молодых историков [Platonov Readings: Materials and Papers of the XXII All-Russian Conference of Young Historians], Samara 2017, pp. 118-120.
7. See: Авраам Л. Каганович, *Антон Лосенко и русское искусство середины 18 столетия* [Avraam L. Kaganovich, Anton Losenko and Russian Art of the Mid-18th Century], Moscow 1963. Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia 1757-1881*, New Haven and London 2016, pp. 36-39. Анна Корндорф, *Изобретение древности. Екатерина II как автор программы национальной исторической живописи* [Anna Komdorf, The Invention of Antiquity. Catherine II as Author of the Programme of National History Painting], in: Искусствознание, no. 2, 2022, pp. 286-333 (with further bibliography). I want to thank Maria Chukcheva for calling my attention to this article.
8. Walter Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian [1937]*, translated by Knut Tarnowski, in: New German Critique, no. 5, 1975, pp. 27-58, esp. pp. 27-28.
9. *Contextualising Putin's "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians"*, interview with Serhii Plokhly, at: News, Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, published on 02.08.2021, <https://huri.harvard.edu/news/putin-historical-unity> (last access: 12.07.2024).
10. Kaganovich 1963 (as note 7), p. 171. Blakesley 2016 (as note 7), pp. 36-37.
11. Serhii Plokhly, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, London 2015, p. 121.
12. Blakesley 2016 (as note 7), pp. 35-36.
13. Ibidem, pp. 11-31.
14. Polly Blakesley, *Ladies-in-Waiting in Waiting: Picturing Adolescence in Dmitry Levitsky's Smolny Portraits, 1772-1776*, in: Art History, vol. 37, no. 1, 2014, pp. 10-37 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12048>. Blakesley 2016 (as note 7), pp. 39-54.
15. Ibidem, p. 36.
16. Ibidem, pp. 36-39.
17. Korndorf 2022 (as note 7), pp. 289, 292-298, 312-324.
18. Михаил В. Ломоносов, *Древняя российская история от начала российского народа до кончины Великого Князя Ярослава Первого или до 1054 года* [Mihail V. Lomonosov, Ancient Russian History from the Beginning of the Russian People to the Death of Grand Prince Yaroslav the First or to 1054], St. Petersburg 1766, p. 96; English translation quoted after: Blakesley 2016 (as note 7), p. 37.
19. Kaganovich 1963 (as endnote 7), pp. 150-152.
20. Ibidem, p. 152.
21. Ibidem, p. 171.
22. Oleksij Tolochko, *Notes on The Radziwiłł Codex*, in: Studi Slavistici, vol. 10, 2013, pp. 29-42, quote: p. 29.
23. The manuscript was available in Saint Petersburg since 1713 because, reportedly, Peter the Great had ordered its exact copy, including images, when visiting Königsberg's Royal Library. It had entered the library as part of Boguslaw Radziwiłł's property ca 1671; ibidem, pp. 29-30.
24. *Радзивилловская летопись* [The Radziwiłł Chronicle], Полное собрание русских летописей [Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles], vol. 38, ed. by М. П. Ирошников [M. P. Iroshnikov] et. al., Leningrad 1989, fol. 42 and fol. 163. The volume does not contain illustrations. See also: Алексей В. Чернецов, *Роковая женщина х в. глазами средневековых миниатюристов* [Aleksej V. Chernecov, The Femme Fatale of the 10th Century through the Eyes of Medieval Miniaturists], in: Российская археология [Russian Archeology], no. 3, 2018, pp. 117-122. It compares the representation of Vladimir and Rogneda in the Radziwiłł Chronicle to miniatures in the Ivan the Terrible Compiled Chronicle, 16th century, which emphasises the theme of the wedding rather than rape.
25. Kaganovich 1963 (as note 7), pp. 158-159.
26. Ibidem, pp. 13-25, and 157-160.
27. Александр А. Писарев, *Предметы для художников, избранные из Российской истории, славянского баснословия и из всех русских сочинений в стихах и прозе* [Aleksandr A. Pisarev, Subjects for Artists, Selected from Russian History, Slavonic Fables and from all Russian Works in Verse and Prose], St. Petersburg 1807.
28. After: Blakesley 2016 (as note 7), p. 39.
29. Seegel 2012 (as note 3), p. 49.
30. Николай М. Карамзин, *История государства Российского* [Nikolaj M. Karamzin, History of the Russian State], 12 vols., Moscow, 1816-1829.
31. Иван Ахматов, *Атлас Исторической, Хронологической и Географической Российской Государства, составленный на основании истории Карамзина* [Ivan Ahmatov, Atlas of the History, Chronology and Geography of the Russian State, compiled on the basis of Karamzin's history], St. Petersburg 1829-1831. See also: Seegel 2012 (as note 3), pp. 51-53.

32. Живописный Карамзин, или Русская история в картинах [Picturesque Karamzin, or Russian History in Pictures], ed. by. Андре Прево [Andre Prevo], Part 1, St. Petersburg 1836.
33. Karamzin 1816-1829 (as note 30), vol. 1, 1816, Chapter 8 and 9, non-paginated. Ahmatov 1829-1831 (as note 31), part I, non-paginated. Picturesque Karamzin (as note 32), pl. XVII.
34. Jeremy Howard and Denis Dokuchaev, *Владимир и Рогнеда в русской живописи эпохи Романовых и в творчестве художника Сергея Грибкова* [‘Vladimir and Rogneda’ in Russian Painting of the Romanov Era and in the artwork of Sergey Gribkov], in: Бурыйлинский альманах [Burylinskij Almanac], vol. 3, no. 4, 2015, pp. 25-30, 62.
35. Richard Taruskin, *Opera and Drama in Russia as preached and Practised in the 1860s*, Ann Arbor, MI 1981. Olga Hadley, *Mamontov’s Private Opera: The Search for Modernism in Russian Theatre*, Bloomington, IN 2010.
36. Shkandrij 2001 (as note 6), p. 87.
37. Nonetheless, the weeping woman is persistently interpreted in Russian art history as one of Rogneda’s maids, and the kneeling figure is seen exclusively through Catherine the Great’s comparison of Losenko’s style to Raphael’s style, Kaganovich 1963 (as note 7), p. 160.
38. Benjamin 1975 (as note 8), pp. 28-29.
39. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge MA and London 1999, p. 462.
40. Contextualising Putin’s “On the historical unity” 2021 (as note 9).
41. For the image see: <https://www.reuters.com/pictures/kim-jong-un-meets-putin-russia-2023-09-13/OH5PITIGEJND5GNTYHOGW6QR7E/>.
42. For the image see: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/12/monumental-step-ukraines-path-europe>.
43. *Viking*, director, Andrei Kravchuk, 2016 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5157456/>.
44. National Bank of Belarus, Rogvolod of Polotsk and Rogneda, 2006, designed by Svetlana Zaskevitch: <https://web.archive.org/web/20101011235815/http://nbrb.by/Coinbanknotes/CommCoin.asp?id=95>.
45. For the explanation of coin by G.V. Laskavy at: <http://www.ehobbex.com/node/1126>.

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Abstract

Antin Losenko’s *Vladmir and Rogneda* (1770), presenting a scene from the history of Kyivan Rus’, has been discussed widely in the context of the origins of Russian history painting and of the invention of the Pan-Russian national iconography in which the imagery of pre-Muscovite Russia served as the myth of origin. The painting was immediately successful because it complied with the requirements of the *Imperial Academy of Art* to glorify Vladimir while putting blame on “haughty” and treacherous Rogneda. The vexed issue of Rogneda’s rape by Vladimir, as well as that of the Ukrainian ethnicity of its maker, has hardly been considered so far. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin’s thesis on history as a constellation of past and present, I aim to identify counter-discourses that emerge in the process of a close visual analysis of this image by the contemporary viewer at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the name of “the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, but also at the time of the “me-too” movement against sexual violence.

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Title

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