

## **Fantasy and propaganda in a fashion drawing by Jean-Baptiste le Prince, about 1770.**

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The Victoria and Albert Museum's Word and Image Department holds an estimated 750,000 prints, drawings, paintings and photographs.<sup>1</sup> These include an outstanding collection of fashion plates embracing diverse media, and spanning many countries and five centuries. They provide an evocative visual overview of European fashion styles from the sixteenth century to the present day.

Among the fashion illustrations is a signed drawing of a young girl by the French artist Jean-Baptiste le Prince (1734-1781) executed around 1770. Born in Metz in 1734 in a family of sculptors and gilders, Le Prince was arguably one of the most prolific French artists of his age. He joined the studio of François Boucher as an apprentice at the age of sixteen, and Boucher, who probably taught him etching, remains to this day his only known master. Like many of Boucher's followers, Le Prince eschewed the formal and often austere drama of historical painting, choosing instead to devote himself to genre pictures and gallant scenes.

The sheet in the V&A collection was part of the bequest that Reverend Alexander Dyce made to the museum in 1869. It has so far remained largely unstudied, apart from an entry in the 1874 catalogue of the Dyce collection that succinctly described it as a 'young maiden dressed in semi-oriental costume, standing, holding a fan in her right hand'.<sup>2</sup> Lightly drawn in black chalk, Le Prince's girl is indeed wearing what can best be described as an orientalisising dress consisting of a looped-up overskirt and fitted bodice with a long-sleeved chemise. Intriguingly, the gown is complemented by large flowing trousers gathered above the ankles of the type worn by middle-eastern men and women. Bare-footed, the maiden is holding a large cockade fan, and sporting a square head-dress with a short veil attached at the back.<sup>3</sup> Possibly a courtesan, she is seductively revealing her delicate ankles and small feet. Her posture could be the gesture for a dance, while her assured yet melancholic gaze is both an invitation, and perhaps an inward meditation upon her own status and condition. Le Prince's graceful maiden strongly recalls Boucher's charming idealised country women, Boucher's influence being particularly manifest in the light treatment of the figure and the vaporous folds of the fabric.

Le Prince's drawing needs to be located within the growing body of orientalisising works produced in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The publication of Antoine Galland's *Thousand and One Night* in several volumes between 1704 and 1717, and the 1721 visit of Turkish ambassadors to Paris had widely contributed to the popularisation of an idealised oriental culture. Permeating all aspects of French art

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Dodds and Ella Ravilious, 'The Factory Project: digitisation at the Victoria and Albert Museum', *Art Libraries Journal*, 34, 2 (2009), pp.10-16.

<sup>2</sup> Reverend Alexander Dyce (1798-1869) bequeathed 3347 works of art, including paintings, miniatures, watercolours and prints, as well as his library of 14,000 volumes to the South Kensington Museum.

<sup>3</sup> A cockade fan was made of a folding leaf that opened into a full circle.

and fashions, *Turqueries* were very much in demand, as evidenced by the publication of Le Hay's *Recueil de Cent Estampes Representant Differentes Nations du Levant* (1714), or by Carle Van Loos's commanding depictions of sultanas and their courts. The trousers worn by Le Prince's maiden would thus have been very familiar to well-to-do eighteenth-century viewers. Van Loo represented Madame de Pompadour wearing them in his imaginative (albeit unflattering) depiction of the royal mistress as a Sultana (1752).<sup>4</sup> In fact such garments would have not been restricted to the artistic realm. We know that Pompadour had these in her wardrobe and that she enjoyed wearing them in private.<sup>5</sup>

But the story is more complex and it would be misleading to understand the present drawing as a standardized Orientalist fantasy. Le Prince's young woman was probably not Middle-Eastern but Russian. Early in Le Prince's career, family connections had brought him to Russia. His brother was a gilder and sales representative (*commissionnaire*) for orders of French furniture at the Imperial court, and one of his sisters was married to Jean-Baptiste-Jules Charpentier, then teacher of languages at the Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. Armed with a letter for the French ambassador to Russia, Le Prince arrived in St Petersburg in the summer of 1757 and rapidly joined the inner circle of court artists, working under the supervision of Bartolomeo Rastrelli on various projects for the Winter Palace.<sup>6</sup>

On his return to France in 1764, Le Prince started specialising in *Russeries*, scenes based on his first-hand observations of Russian costumes and customs. Diderot noted of his works exhibited at the Salon in 1765 that they were 'amusing' and that 'one could count on the veracity and exactitude of the pencil, it is both instructive and pleasing'.<sup>7</sup> His depictions of urban upper-class Russia were rare. Directly inspired by 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch and Flemish scenes which he would have known through prints, Le Prince focussed on genre scenes located in idealised rural settings rather than the domesticity of indoor scenes. Le Prince's production however transcended the boundaries of mere artistic practice. His aesthetic project intersected with a proto-ethnographic concern to record Russian folk life. To this end, he produced an extensive series of engravings of costumes and trades that were inspired by Parisian street cries depicting tradesmen and women engaged in their daily activities.<sup>8</sup> Le Prince's iconography, however, remained a hybrid between the rococo fantasy and a true ethnographic enquiry.

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<sup>4</sup> It was one of three paintings with a Turkish theme executed for the Château of Bellevue. The set was acquired by Catherine the Great in 1782 and is now in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. See C. Jones, *Madame de Pompadour. Images of a Mistress*, (London: National Gallery, 2002), pp. 73-75, and X. Salmon (ed.), *Madame de Pompadour et les Arts* (Paris: RMN, 2002), p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> X. Salmon (ed.), *Madame de Pompadour et les Arts* (Paris: RMN, 2002), p. 179.

<sup>6</sup> He designed for instance an overdoor for the grand apartments of Empress Elizabeth. See *Jean-Baptiste Le Prince : Le Voyage en Russie, Collections de la Ville de Rouen* (Rouen : Musée des Beaux Arts de Rouen, 2005), pp. 13-27.

<sup>7</sup> In a note to the Salon of 1865 Diderot noted that they were 'amusant[s]' and that 'on peut compter sur la véracité et l'exactitude du crayon, il est aussi instructif qu'agréable'. Diderot's 1767 review of Le Prince's work was harsher, lamenting the artist's superficiality: 'si un tartare, un cosaque, un russe voyait cela il dirait à l'artiste: tu as pillé toutes nos garde-robes, mais tu n'as pas connu une de nos passions.'

<sup>8</sup> Such as for instance those executed by Edmé Bouchardon.

Like *Turqueries*, *Russeries* were very much in demand in wealthy intellectual urban circles. Le Prince's return to France coincided with Catherine the Great's recent accession to the throne. Her sustained efforts to forge links with European enlightened elites had familiarised Europe with various aspects of Russian culture. The *Russeries* that Le Prince produced alongside Moreau le Jeune and Caresme de Fecamp to illustrate the Abbé Chappe d'Auteroche's lavish three-volume publication *Voyage en Sibérie* (1768) have often been considered by art historians as some of his most accomplished works, cementing his popularity and reputation.<sup>9</sup> Intended as an account of Chappe's journey to Russia undertaken to observe the transit of Venus of 1761, the book was an immediate success. A second edition was published in 1769, and an English translation was produced a year later. Although tied to following Chappe d'Auteroche's text accurately, Le Prince conjured up his memories and experiences of Russia to produce vivid, albeit highly aestheticised, images of its countryside and inhabitants.

While Le Prince's output has been widely circulated in printed form, tantalisingly, it has not yet been possible to associate the V&A drawing with any of his published works.<sup>10</sup> The V&A sheet bears some resemblance to a print at the British Museum 'Moravian peasant coming from the market' (1875.0710.2929). Both figures wear a head dress that is in fact a type of square kokoshnik with a short veil at the back, while a three-row beaded necklace supplements their attire.<sup>11</sup> Another drawing entitled 'Russian Woman' sold at Christies in 2005 can also be compared to the V&A sheet: a bare-footed woman, in almost the same position as our maiden, is wearing a middle-eastern trousers under a dress, although the latter is longer with a bodice framed by a large belt, and it is covered in part by a coat.<sup>12</sup> This woman's garb throws into relief the combination of fashion and tradition, fantasy and orientalisng present in the dress in the V&A sketch. The gown in the latter is very clearly derived from the fashionable *Polonoise*, popular in France and England in the 1770s. Worn over a petticoat, it had a close-fitting bodice structured with boning. The skirts were pulled up by drawstrings at the back, usually in three poufs. The very name of this gown in French and English fashion circles underlined its associations with central rather than western Europe, though the fashion was probably first set in Paris.<sup>13</sup>

Like *Chinoiseries* and *Turqueries*, and despite Diderot's claims, Le Prince's *Russeries* should not therefore be taken at face value. They depicted a reality heavily inflected and distorted by the pastoral fantasies of rococo aesthetics. But crucially, the significance of his works lies not in what they reveal about Russia, but what they suggest about the country's perceived national and cultural identity, as some of Russia's European neighbours saw it – or wanted to see it. To them Russia was a

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<sup>9</sup> K. Rorschach, *Drawings by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince for the Voyage en Sibérie* (Philadelphia : Rosenbach Museum & Library, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> *Divers ajustements et usages de Russie* (Paris, 1764) ; *Divers habillements des femmes de Moscovie* (Paris, 1764) ; *Divers habillements des prêtres de Russie* (Paris, 1764) ; *Première suite de cris et divers marchands de Pétersbourg et de Moscou* (Paris, 1765) ; *Deuxième suite de divers cris de marchands de Russie* (Paris, 1765) ; *Deuxième suite d'habillements des femmes de Moscovie* (Paris, 1768). It is neither linked to the six 'Jeux Russiens' cartoons woven at the Beauvais manufacture from 1769.

<sup>11</sup> The kokoshnik was a traditional Russian head-dress that usually worn by women with a sarafan, a long sleeveless tunic.

<sup>12</sup> Christie's, London, 5 July 2005, lot 159.

<sup>13</sup> N. Rothstein (ed.), *Four Hundred Years of Fashion* (London: V&A Publications, 1992), pp. 30, 175.

predominantly Oriental state, despite Peter the Great's attempts to impose Western clothes, and Catherine the Great's enlightened imperial guidance.<sup>14</sup> Part of a wider anti-Russian diplomatic campaign, Chappe's *Voyage* effectively presented Russia as a monolithic rural bloc characterized by picturesque costumes, yet still engaged in barbaric practices and punishments that included flogging and impaling.<sup>15</sup> Although it is doubtful that a conscious and deliberate political agenda framed Le Prince's artistic practice, his seemingly innocent pastorals and genre scenes evidently contravened Russia's calculated self-Europeanization strategies.

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<sup>14</sup> R. P. Blaksely et al., *Magnificence of the Tsars. Ceremonial Men's Dress of the Russian Imperial Court, 1721-1917* (London: V&A Publications, 2008), pp. 14-15. A. Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715-1789* (London: Batsford, 1984), pp. 75-58. C. Ruane, 'European Fashion in Russia', in *Picturing Russia. Explorations in Visual Culture*, edited by Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 119-23.

<sup>15</sup> Incensed by what she perceived as little less than deleterious propaganda, Catherine the Great published a response to Chappe's book, *Antidote, ou Examen du mauvais livre superbement imprimé intitulé Voyage en Sibirie* (1770), noting his errors and effectively challenging and disputing his arguments systematically and methodically. See M.C. Levitt, 'An antidote to nervous juice: Catherine the Great's debate with Chappe D'Auteroche over Russian culture', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32, 1 (1998), pp. 49-63.