Word-image Interaction in the Treatise “Voyage en Sibérie”

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Abstract

Voyage en Sibérie describes a journey through Russia carried out by Jean Chappe d'Auteroche to observe the passage of Venus across the Sun. Besides the description of this phenomenon the book contains the author’s travel notes and study of the Russian political, historical, geographic and military conditions in the middle of the 18th century. Voyage en Sibérie was accompanied by the cycle of illustrations performed by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince. As these works were among the first examples of the costume images on the Russian subject, they became crucial in the career of the artist who is considered to be the creator of “Russerie” in French art. This paper discusses the nature of the text and illustrations developing according to the logic of ideas of the Enlightenment. The author intends to show that although Chappe d'Auteroche and Le Prince worked together on the book they had different visions of the problem.

Keywords: Enlightenment, costume book, “Russerie”, travel notes, illustration, etching.

1. Introduction

The treatise Voyage en Sibérie (Fig. 1.1 in presentation) was written by the French abbot and astronomer, member of the French Academy of Sciences Jean Chappe d’Auteroche (1722-1769). It was mostly decorated with the etchings by the drawings of the French painter and etcher Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (1734-1781).

Jean Chappe d’Auteroche (Fig. 1.2) came from a noble Cantal family, he received a religious education at a Jesuit college in Moryak. He was admitted to the Royal Academy of Science on 14 January 1759. He was also appointed assistant astronomer at the Royal Observatory. In 1760 he went to Russia, to Tobolsk, to observe the passage of Venus across the Sun, which was to take place on 6 June 1761. He returned to Paris in 1762 and started working at Voyage en Sibérie. A year after the book was finished, he took a trip to California, intending to observe a similar astronomical phenomenon. During the trip, the abbot died. And, thus, Voyage en Sibérie remained the most significant abbot's work.

Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (Fig. 1.3) was born in the city of Metz, in the family of a wood carver. He first studied painting in his native town, but in 1750 he moved to Paris and entered the workshop of Francois Boucher (1703-1770). He also took some lessons from Joseph-Marie Vien (1716-1809). In 1757 he arrived in St. Petersburg, where for the next six years he was working at the order of the imperial court of the Russian Empress Elizaveta Petrovna (1741-1761). He was an active member of the “Kanselary ot stroeniy”, a state institution in charge of the development of
St. Petersburg and played an important role in the decoration of the new-built Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. At that time, he painted some views of the famous Russian coasts and harbors and he created a number of sketches, reflecting his “Russian impressions”. Nowadays, it seems almost impossible to reliably establish all places that the artist visited, however, some scholars believe that in addition to St. Petersburg and Moscow, Le Prince also travelled to some remote territories of the Russian Empire and might have accompanied Chappe d’Auteroche during his journey to Tobolsk. Then in 1763 Le Prince returned to Paris and in 1765 he presented at the Salon a painting “Le baptême russe”, for this picture the artist was admitted to the French Academy of Arts. Shortly afterwards Le Prince created a special appellation to his works of art, dealing with the Russian subject – “Russerie”. While creating this concept, Le Prince, apparently, linked it with earlier examples of the names of exoticisms in European art, namely, with “Chinoiserie” and “Turquerie”, which received pan-European distribution in the 18th century. Another important step in his career was the publication of Voyage en Sibérie.

• The treatise Voyage en Sibérie had a Europe-wide response in the first years after its publication. The content of the book and its design (illustrations) received the opposite assessments.
• While working on the text, Chappe d’Auteroche adhered to the most advanced ideas of his time, but wasn’t quite objective on a number of issues.
• Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, while working on the illustrations, presented his own vision of the Russian reality. He made illustrations which can be considered as one of the first examples of the costume images on the Russian theme, which were widespread in Europe.
• On the basis of the word-image interaction it was shown that, despite the fact that the text and illustrations rely on the ideas of the Enlightenment, they ultimately contradict each other.

It was published for the first time in Paris in 1768 and since that time it had a Europe-wide response. Since the beginning of the 18th century Russia, afterwards the Russian Empire, had become a powerful player of the European politics, it gained an immense interest in on the part of the European public. Voyage en Sibérie came out just on time to satisfy that interest. Unlike many works on Russian subject produced in Europe at that time, this book was based on the abbot’s travel notes and therefore was regarded as the source of reliable information about Russia and its population.

The first edition of the treatise was accompanied by the French Academy of Sciences resolution conforming that Voyage en Sibérie can be regarded as the piece of academic papers. Jean Leron d’Alembert (1717-1783), Bernard de Jussieu (1699-1777) and Etienne Bezout (1730-1783), all three members of the Academy, acted as guarantors. But when the book reached its readers it received extremely contradictory reviews. On the one hand, people extolled the treatise, on the other – teared it to pieces.

1.1 Public opinion

One example of the appreciation can be found in the Le Journal encyclopédique ou universel, 1716-1785. According the book review of 1770 (Liechtenhan, 2002), Chappe d’Auteroche was even more important than all ancient philosophers, [Il meritait] a preference sur tous les sages les plus célèbres de l’antiquité (p. 37). “Voyage...” was considered as an important source of knowledge for Europeans who wanted to see the real matter of state in Russia.

At the same time a review came out in the “Correspondence littéraire, philosophique et critique” written by Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm (1723-1807). In 1769 (Proskurina, 2017) he told his readers that Voyage en Sibérie was a “great example of ignorance, arrogance, platitude, light-mindedness, immature and petty taste and indifference to truth” (p. 26). He also
pointed out that Chappe d’Auteroche didn’t try to understand the essence of the phenomena he described.

But the greatest reaction on *Voyage en Sibérie* was *Antidot ou Réfutation du mauvais livre superbement imprimé intitulé: Voyage en Sibérie, etc.*, a book by an anonymous, published in 1770 without indication of locus sigilli (place of publication). According to the majority of the researchers this text belonged to the group of authors with the Russian Empress Catherine the Great, 1762-1796, at the head. Count Andrei Petrovitch Chouvalov (1743-1789), Russian diplomat and gallophile, and Grigory Vasilievitch Kositsky (1724-1776), cabinet secretary of Catherine the Great, editor of the magazine *Vsyakaya vsyachina* (can be translated as “All Sorts and Sundries”) are considered to have been working on “The Antidote” as well. This book presents a meticulous analysis of *Voyage en Sibérie*. It examines every line of the treatise and draws attention to the minute details of the narrative. The author quotes and makes fun of Chappe d’Autcrohe and gives his own interpretation of the described phenomena.

Also, for the first time a question was raised in “The Antidote” concerning the connection of *Voyage en Sibérie* with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs headed by Étienne François de Choiseul (1719-1785). According to the “author” of “The Antidote” the Chappe d’Autcrohe’s work was part of the Ministry of Propaganda aimed at setting up the minds of the Europeans against the Russia which in perspective was leading to political isolation of the Russian Empire on the eve of the Russo-Turkish War, 1768-1774.

However, the design of the treatise *Voyage en Sibérie* performed by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince received complements from both sides of the discussion who appreciated the artistic value of the illustrations. In the introduction to the book Chappe d’Autcrohe acknowledged the talent of Le Prince and expressed his gratitude to the artist for the well-done work. According to Chappe d’Autcrohe (1768) the drawings were essential for the description of the Russian people: “*Les dessins nécessaires à la description des moeurs font de M. Le Prince, de l’Académie de Peinture: on reconnoît dans la beauté de ses compositions la fécondité de son genie & son rare talent pour rendre le costume & la nature, qu’il a étudié en Russie*” (Chappe d’Autcrohe, 1768: 2).

The “author” of “The Antidot” (1770) also underlined the high quality of the illustrations. In the introduction to “The Antidot” he, while having an imagery discussion with Chappe d’Autcrohe, ironically pointed out that Le Prince’s etchings were the best part of the treatise: “The best in your book are the drawings of Mr. Leprince. It is a pity that in our time all bad compositions are adorned with such magnificent prints” (Carrère d’Encausse, 2005: 227).

Taking into consideration the historical background I intend to consider the text written by Chappe d’Autcrohe and illustrations performed by Le Prince as an example of two interacting phenomena that have their own laws and principles of existence and form differently the image of the Russian Empire.

2. Method

The research methods are of a complex nature. They are based on a combination of linguistic, cultural-philosophical, historical methods, as well as on one of the art history methods of iconographic analysis. Special attention is paid to the linguistic analysis of the text, namely to the interpretation of the image of Russia and the Russian people, presented in the text by Jean Chappe d’Autcrohe and the iconographic analysis of the illustrations created by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince as well as the study of artist’s individual manner. Besides, the article contains a fairly complete historical material that makes it possible to show the history of the creation of the treatise *Voyage en Sibérie*, its further destiny, as well as the reconstruction of the contemporaries’ ideas concerning the features of the text, its illustrations, and to show their assessment in Russia and in France. Thus, the study examines the interaction of literature and graphic arts,
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(illustrations). On the one hand, this process seems to be the result of the literary sources influence on the artistic samples, which is due to the main features of the illustration art. On the other hand, I think that this process is not so simple as the illustrations for the treatise Voyage en Sibérie can also be treated as an example of the costume image, independent genre of fine arts. The study attempts to show the methods and tools for shaping the image of Russia and the Russian people, which are used by Chappe d’Autroche and Le Prince, as well as to show the mechanisms of the interconnection of literature and the text in interpreting the Russian subject.

3. Text analysis

Despite the fact that the recent research of Chappe d’Autroche’s treatise is regarded politically engaged, I think that it still remains a striking example of work of the Age of Enlightenment.

This work consists of three volumes and includes the observation of the passage of Venus across the Sun, as well as Chappe d’Autroche’s travel notes that he produced during his journey from Paris to Tobolsk, the place of his scientific research. It, also, includes the “Description of the land of Kamchatka” written by Stepan Petrovitch Krasheninnikov (1711-1755), an important Russian ethnographer and explorer of the distant lands of Siberia and Kamchatka. This work was published in France for the first time together with Voyage en Sibérie.

Although the main theme of the treatise was the study of the astronomical phenomenon, Chappe d’Auteroche still paid special attention to the observation and description of the life of the Russian population, and in particular to that of the peasants. He also included his thoroughly collected and classified information, about the structure of the Russian state its geography and history (Fig. 3.1).

This immense interest in the description of the “voyage” can be explained by the fact that in the 18th century travelling was considered as a kind of research that contributed to the development of the traveler’s personality, the broadening of his horizons and the enrichment of his knowledge and helped him to get rid of prejudices. This idea was stated in the article by chevalier Louis de Jaucourt (1704-1779) for the Encyclopédie, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts (1751-1772): “Aujourd’hui les voyages dans les États polices de l’Europe (car il ne s’agit pas ici des voyages de long cours), sont au jugement des personnes éclairées, une partie des plus importantes de l’éducation dans la jeunesse,& une partie de l’expérience dans les vieillards. Les voyages étendent l’esprit, l’élevent, l’enrichissent de connaissances, & le guérissent des préjugés nationaux… Ainsi le principal bit qu’on doit se proposer dans les voyages est sans contredit d’examiner les mœurs, les costumes, le génie d’autres nations, leur goût dominant, leurs arts, leurs sciences, leurs manufactures & leur commerce” (De Jaucourt et al., 1754: 477). Travel literature seems to have played the same role. According to the historian Daniel Roche (Roche, 2003), reading such texts was equated with the travel itself in the 18th century (Roche, 2003: 359-360). Therefore, I think that travel literature is noted for the same “developing” qualities as the travelling itself.

Apparently, this peculiarity of perception determines the fact that in Voyage en Sibérie the scientific reasoning, an astronomical observations and descriptions of natural electricity, coexists almost on par with the observations of everyday life, issued as a travel diary or travel notes. This diary contain extremely diverse information. Chappe d’Auteroche draws readers’ attention to the structure of the Russian hut, to the design of the sleigh, to the features of the Russian bath. He also introduces original Russian words into the description of various phenomena, such as pirozhki, snetki, luchina, kvas, tulup, balalajka, and tries to explain the meaning of these words to the reader. But the people with whom he had to interact during his journey played the main role in his narrative. In the Introduction to his book, Chappe d’Auteroche)
explains his interest in the Russian people as follows: “humanity, considered in the voyages from
different points of view, offers the most interesting picture, and the most suitable for the education
of men & to direct them towards happiness” (d’Auteroche, 1768: 1). These ideas correspond closely
to the texts of chevalier de Jaucourt.

However, in his strive to pursue educational goals, the abbot remains subjective in his
statements: the ignorance of the Russian language did not allow him to understand the essence of
national Russian culture and many its phenomena. He reduced the description of Easter to a farce,
and the traditions of the Russian wedding seem to him rather meaningless. At the same time while
analyzing the way of life of the peasants, Chappe d’Auteroche used a completely traditional method
dealing with the extrapolation of the traits and qualities of individuals for the whole population.

The language of Voyage en Sibérie is vivid, the text is built on the principle of a
constant change of scenery, and the lengthy descriptions that sometimes occur in it are interpreted
by the author ironically.

4. Illustrations to the text

Illustrations by J.-B. Le Prince, provide visual accompaniment to the text. In the
Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia are preserved 32 preparatory drawings created
by Le Prince as samples for future illustrations. It is these drawings that will become the object of
this research.

During the work on the book the drawings were etched by various masters, among
whom it is necessary to name J.-B. Tilliard (1740-1830), who made 32 etchings, independently
and 2 in collaboration with his wife, and J.-F. Le Bas (1707-1783), to whose cutting tool belong 4
engravings.

The drawings later became a part of the Roederer Collection, that was, according to
Kimery Rorschach (Rorschach, 1985), one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of
eighteenth-century French drawings, prints, and illustrated books ever assembled. According to
some documents of the Rosenbach Company archives at the Rosenbach Museum and Library this
collection contained some 6000 books, 1000 drawings, and 750 prints. In 1922 it was acquired
by Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach. This important American rare book dealer and collector sold many
items from this collection; However, he kept a few drawings, prints, and books for himself.
Nowadays these works belong to the Rosenbach Museum and Library, among which are Le
Prince’s drawings.

Although Le Prince’s drawings are connected with the text, they do not strictly follow
the logic of the narrative, they create their own narrative series. Just like the text, these images are
aimed at solving the educational problem by visual means. I strongly believe that these works
correspond to the genre of costume images that was widespread in 18th century art in Europe.

The first definition of costume images translated into Russian language can be found
in the dictionary part of the Dmitrij Alekseevich Golisyn’s book (Golisyn, 1767-1768). At present
“The description of the prominent schools and their painters and about others” of 1767-1768 by
Golisyn is considered to be one of the first essays on art history in Russia. According to Golisyn,
the term “costume” was taken from the Italian language and “signified the similarity of the
presented plot with a historical adventure on the occasion of manners, characters, fashions,
customs, clothes, weapons, structures, laws, tastes, fruits, fruits, animals, circumstances of the
place, and time where the action took place, etc.” (Kaganovich, 1963: 312).

A more detailed description of this genre can be found in an article written by Louis
de Jaucourt for the Encyclopédie (de Jaucourt, 1754). According to de Jaucourt, the costume
assumes an accurate and detailed display of the inclinations, mores, laws, characters and habits
of the inhabitants of the depicted country. The costume has to correspond to a certain epoch not to distort the historical facts, and properly depict the material objects. At the same time, Chevalier de Jaucourt notes that the author of the costume had to clearly define the scene, time and occupation of the characters represented.

“Le costume est l’art de traiter un sujet dans toute la vérité historique : c’est donc, comme le définit fort bien l’auteur du dictionnaire des Beaux-arts, l’observation exacte de ce qui est, suivant le tem, le génie, les mœurs, les lois, le goût, les richesses, le caractère & les habitudes d’un pays où l’on place la scene d’un tableau. Le costume renferme encore tout ce qui regarde la chronologie, & la vérité de certains faits connus de tout le monde ; enfin tout ce qui concerne la qualité, la nature, & la propriété essentielle des objets qu’on représente... Il faut de plus représenter les lieux où l’action s’est passée, tels qu’ils ont été, si nous en avons connoissance ; & quand il n’en est pas demeuré de notion précise, il faut, en imaginant leur disposition, prendre garde à ne se point trouver en contradiction avec ce qu’on en peut savoir” (de Jaucourt, 1754: 298).

Such definitions of the costume genre allow us to speak of it as a kind of “proto-ethnography” and “the foundation of ethnography”. After all, it is due to the wide development of the costume genre and competent descriptions of the far away countries it was possible to accumulate material and written sources to become the foundation of Modern history, and ethnography as well.

It is interesting to notice that the definitions of costume image do not regulate its formal features and construction, that allows us to interpret this genre extremely widely. Costume genre is used in the scenes dealing with interior, pastorals, landscape, one-figure and multi-figure compositions, as well as a portrait.

Although, the feature of the costume is the most accurate and detailed fixation of the most typical lifestyle, as well as the creation of unique collective characters, it does not transfer the individuality of a person. In this case, the artistic image is created within the framework of scientific interests in collecting information.

It is noteworthy that Le Prince was not the first foreign artist to use costume genre for the Russian peasants’ representation. A. Dalshtein dealt with it. However, it was Le Prince who, for certain reasons, came down in history as the initiator of the “Russian theme” in Western art. Unlike A. Dahlstein, whose engravings remained unknown to the general public and researchers for a long time, Le Prince’s series were very popular among his contemporaries, both in France and in Russia. The treatise *Voyage en Sibérie* was reprinted several times: in 1771 in Amsterdam and in 1772 in London. Both books are smaller in size and accompanied by a selected number of Le Prince’s illustrations. It is noteworthy that while working on the illustrations commissioned by the Chappe d’Auteroche, Le Prince created several independent series of costumes depicting Russian townspeople and villagers. These series, while creating additional illustrative material to the text, fueled the interest of the treatise’s potential readers.

While working on the illustrations, Le Prince focuses on the detailed rendering of the space surrounding the personages and with its help he characterizes the way of life of the Russian people.

In numerous drawings one can find recurring motifs that move from image to image, becoming indispensable attributes of peasant life. It was typical for Le Prince in his representation of the Russian stove, the baby cradle suspended from the ceiling and a plank-bed under the ceiling (Fig. 4.1).

Le Prince endows his figures with typical qualities and poses, showing them and their costumes. The clothes of his figures are detailed but their poses are often frozen, and their faces do not express any individualized emotions. It is interesting to notice that while creating
preparatory drawings for etchings, Le Prince sketches the faces as schematically as possible, leaving their details to the etchers (Fig. 4.2-4.4).

At the same time, these illustrations have a certain artistic merit. In terms of style, they can be considered as an example of the Rococo style, flourishing at that time in European arts. The painter focuses on female and child images correlating with the style’s aesthetics (Fig. 4.5). While working with the nude, Le Prince creates figures that tease with their sensuality and graceful tenderness and captivate with their charming roundness (Fig. 4.6). At the same time, developing multi-figured compositions, the artist creates idyllic scenes filled with universal peace, which corresponds to the tasks of the rocaille pastoral.

I believe that it is the direct comparison of text and drawings that helps reveal the relationship between the images of Russia and the Russian people, created by Le Prince and Chappe d’Auteroche. In his travel notes, Chappe d’Auteroche leaves a detailed description of a peasant family with which he once stayed for the night: “The first thing that struck me when I stepped inside was the figure of an old woman. Swinging the child in the hanging box, she dozed off. Her wrinkled smoked with stove smoke skin, was a disgusting sight, and the ridiculous outfit further aggravated the ugliness. Nearby, a young woman rose on a bench, more eager to satisfy her curiosity than to bring her open shirt back into proper shape, except for which she was wearing nothing. This mess in clothes and free behavior revealed all the delights inherent in her years... Near the bench the small children were sleeping right on the floor, just like calves in a barn; the rest of the household huddled side by side on the stove and the plank-beds, some were asleep, others were staring at me, surprised at the invasion of their home no less than I was by the entire scene and faces of the people in front of me” (d’Auteroche, 1768: 63-64).

Following the narrative of the abbot, Le Prince creates an interior scene of the Russian dwelling (Fig. 4.7) that fully corresponds to the content of the text. However, despite the detailed specification, the image makes a different impression than the text. The old woman, whose appearance so strongly impressed Chappe d’Auteroche, is represented as a neutral character. The artist is not interested in the theme of ugliness; in her depiction, Le Prince focuses on the peculiarities of her dress. The figures of the mother and children in the center of the composition can hardly be perceived as the representation of the Russian peasantry. Yakov Bruk, an important Russian art historian, noticed that in terms of style they resemble the characters of Fragonard and Boucher (Bruk, 1990: 67). The artist ennobles his figures. Their gestures are theatrical, so are their emotions. The exotic world of the Russian hut plays an important role in Le Prince’s conception: the stove, the plank-beds, the wooden floors, as well as pots scattered on the floor create a sense of contrast and further emphasize the alien character of the characters. That seems to be the consequence the French artist’s perception of the peculiarities of the life of Russian peasants through the prism of the Rococo style.

5. Results

While working on the first edition of the *Voyage en Sibérie*, abbot Jean Chappe d’Auteroche and Jean Baptiste Le Prince pursued the same educational and enlightening goals consistent with the ideas of the European Enlightenment. The abbot’s travel notes, and the artist’s costume images are traced same source and their desire to know and understand a distant, little-studied country. However, while the work of Chappe d’Auteroche seems to be a meticulous but sometimes haphazard collection of information on the basis of which a scholar seeks to construct casual relationships. And in his language, there is clearly a sense of the superiority of an enlightened European man over ignorant peasant. In Le Prince’s drawings, the cognitive and artistic aspects are merged into one. The goals of literal similarity and closeness to nature in his works are closely intertwined with the aesthetic views of the Rococo master. His figures are interesting and pleasant, and the place of action is sometimes perceived as a kind of fantasy which
completely contradicts to the vision to the down-to-earth approach of Chappe d'Auteroche. Thus, we can say that on the pages of the treatise *Voyage en Sibérie* there are two phenomena related to each other by their tasks, but at the same time, fundamentally opposed to each other in their attitude towards the subject.

6. Discussion

The significance of this research lies in two main ideas.

Firstly, I have made an attempt to understand and explain the essentials of the costume image based on the theoretical works of the Age of Enlightenment. Such a research seems to be timely, as at present the costume images are most often considered as an important source of information for the ethnography dealing with the life and appearance of different nations’ representatives. However, these images are rarely considered as an inherently valuable, independent phenomenon, standing at the intersection of fine arts and science. This article is intended to show the characteristic features of these images and partly reconstruct their functions and comprehensions in the 18th century. It is important to notice that costume images were really closely interacted with the text in the 18th century. The role of the text in this case was quite variable: the costume images could act as illustrations, complementing detailed travel notes or they could be bound into a separate album and were accompanied by captions explaining the content. In this work, I would like to present one of the possible ways of talking about this type of images, based on the word-image interaction.

Secondly, I think that this work can be considered as a significant step in the research of Le Prince’s “Russerie” which is becoming an important artistic genre consisting in a detailed depiction of Russian reality seen by the French artist. It is noteworthy that in the following decade after returning to France, Le Prince was totally absorbed with this theme. It became the main one in his work and united different types of fine arts: graphics and painting. The illustrations for the treatise *Voyage en Sibérie* were among the first examples of “Russerie” in Le Prince’s career. And, thus, we can say that it was during the work on the book that Le Prince first found a theme that would become the key to his further work.

7. Conclusion

This article presents the research of the treatise *Voyage en Sibérie*, its content and decoration, created by Jean Chappe d’Auteroche and by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince. Particular attention is paid to the decoration of the first edition of the treatise, made by M. Le Prince. In this article, for the first time, is raised the idea that Le Prince’s illustrations can be considered as an example of the costume genre, which tasks were correlating with the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment about the knowledge of the world. Le Prince’s illustrations thus enter into dialogue with the travel notes and sometimes even create an image completely opposite to the narrative.

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