4 Yermolova

The subject for discussion is Valentin Serov's portrait of Yermolova in the Tretyakov Gallery.[68]

Many were those who experienced the quite special feeling of *exaltation* and *inspiration* that gripped the spectator when watching the original of this portrait.

The portrait shows an extremely sparing use of colour. It is almost chilling in the severity of its pose; it is almost crude in its disposition of masses; it is devoid of background and 'stage props'. A single vertical black figure stands against the grey background of a wall and a mirror. This cuts the figure at the waist and reflects a piece of the opposite wall and ceiling of the empty room in which the actress has been painted.

Yet, in contemplating this canvas, one is seized by something of the same emotion which the personality of the great actress must have evoked on the stage.

There have been, of course, malicious tongues which denied there was anything in any way remarkable about this portrait.

One such, for instance, was the late Ivan A. Aksionov, who grumbled about it: 'Nothing special. She always used to act with her stomach stuck out. And in Serov's portrait she is standing with her stomach thrust forward.'[69] Here, no doubt, Aksionov's odd 'non-acceptance' of the actress herself (whom he disliked) has become fused with his attitude towards the way Serov recreated her image with such exactitude.

I never saw Yermolova on stage, and I only know about her acting from the descriptions and very detailed accounts of those who saw her, but my impressions of Yermolova, gained from the 'data' of the Serov portrait, are similar to the enthusiasm with which Stanislavsky wrote about her:

> Maria Nikolayevna Yermolova represents a whole epoch of the Russian theatre, and for our generation she was a symbol of womanliness, beauty, strength, emotional power, genuine simplicity and modesty. Her gifts were unique. She had a power of insight amounting to genius, an inspired temperament, great nervous sensitivity, inexhaustible spiritual depths. . . . To every part that she played, Yermolova always gave a particular image that was unlike the preceding one and unlike that of any other actor.
>
> The roles which Yermolova created live on in the memory with an

> independent existence, despite the fact that they were all compounded of the same organic material, of her single spiritual personality.
>
> . . . All her movements, her words, her actions, even if they were misjudged or mistaken, were suffused with fire from within, with an emotion that could be warm and gentle or fiery and thrilling. . . .Wise in the ways of the female heart, more than anyone else she had the ability to reveal and display *das ewig Weibliche*.[70]

Something resembling this feeling overcame me when I stood in front of this portrait at the exhibition of Serov's work at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1935. For a long time I reflected on how, with an almost total absence of a painter's usual external effects – and Serov possessed a considerable arsenal of effects – he had achieved such a remarkable inner power of *inspired exaltation* in painting the figure.

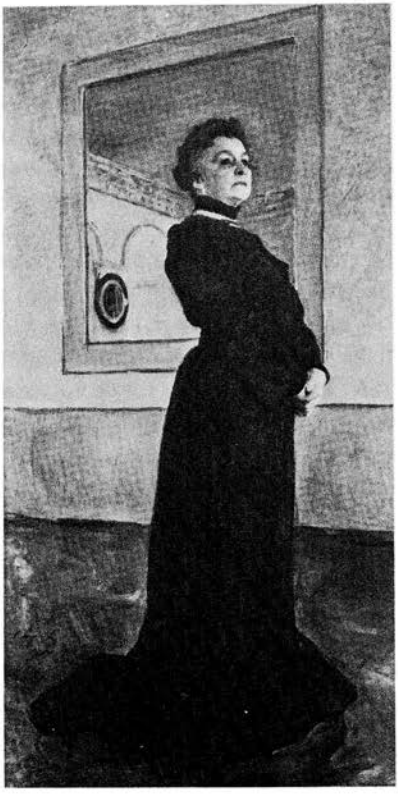
I think I have solved this mystery. This *unusual* effect has been achieved through the application of truly unusual means of compositional expression. Furthermore, the means used here are such that in essence they have already outdistanced that stage of painting to which the picture itself still belongs.

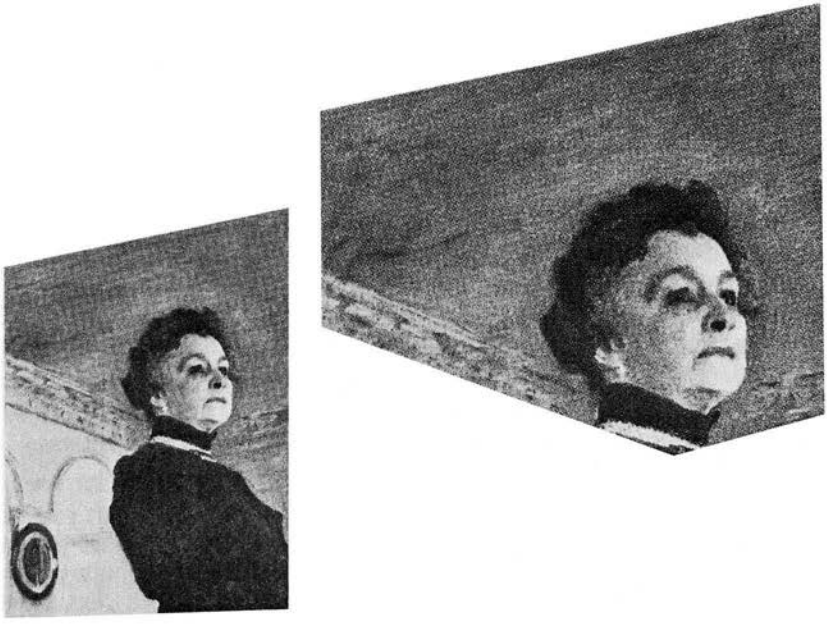
To my mind, every truly great work of art is *always* distinguished by this characteristic: it contains, as part and parcel of the artist's *method*, elements of what in the next phase of development of that particular art form will become the *principles* and *methods* of a new stage in the forward progress of that art.

In the given instance this is especially interesting, because these *unusual* compositional factors not only lie beyond the limits of the methods of painting used in Serov's era, but *altogether beyond the limits of painting as it is narrowly understood*, at least from the viewpoint of those who do not regard the pictorial medium of cinema – its dynamic use of light and montage to make pictures – as a contemporary form of painting. There actually are such eccentrics who obstinately refuse to understand this and are totally unable to accept cinema – that miracle of pictorial potential – as part of the mainstream of the development and history of painting. This seems to me profoundly unjust: the difference of 'technology' is irrelevant. After all, the hospitable edifice of the history of painting embraces such technically diverse media as, say, etching and . . . the mosaics of Ravenna!

As for the fundamental and decisive factor, that is to say *artistic thinking*, then the 'gap' between Picasso and the cinematographer is significantly narrower than that between Paul Signac and the Wanderers [*Peredvizhniki*].[71] And as for the classification of photography as a 'mechanical' art, allegedly devoid of the direct, living touch of the creative 'act', I must say that the subtle structuring of a shot, the refined nuances of lighting and the strict calculation of tonal values found in the work of our best cameramen have long been capable of competing on equal terms with the best examples of the art of the past!

Let us, however, return to the portrait of Yermolova.





V.A. Serov: *Portrait of M.N. Yermolova*

It was not by chance that I referred to the mirror as cutting the figure. To my mind, in that 'cut' and in the montage-like juxtaposition of the results of that cut there lies the fundamental secret of the effect of this portrait.

I have written and spoken many times about montage as being not so much the sequence of segments as their *simultaneity*: in the consciousness of the perceiver, segment is piled on segment, and their incongruences of colour, lighting, outline, scale, movement, etc., are what gives that sense of dynamic thrust and impulse which generates a sense of movement, ranging from the perception of purely *physical movement* to the most complex forms of *intraconceptual movement* when we are dealing with a montage that juxtaposes metaphors, images or concepts.

Therefore we should in no way be confused by the following reflections, which concern the *simultaneous conjoint presence* on one canvas of elements which are, in essence, *the successive phases of a whole process.*

Nor should we be puzzled by the fact that the various elements are simultaneously seen both as separate *independent units* and as *inseparable parts of a single whole* (or as separate groups within that whole).

Moreover, as we shall see below, the very fact of that unity of *simultaneity* and *sequence* proves to be a unique means of producing an absolutely specific effect.

But let us get down to business.

I said that the frame of the mirror 'cuts' the figure. The figure is cut not only by the frame of the mirror; it is also cut by the line of the skirting-board, i.e. the line at which the floor meets the wall, and it is cut by the broken line of the cornice, that is to say the line, reflected in the mirror, at which the wall meets the ceiling.

Strictly speaking, these lines do not cut the figure: they go as far as her outline and politely break off; only by mentally extending them do we slice across the figure at various levels, thereby separating from each other the lower part of the dress, the bust and the head.

Let us extend these lines in fact, and 'cut' the portrait into sections (see illustration).

When this is done, the straight lines which figure *as objects* in the picture (as do the frame of the mirror and the lines of juncture between floor and wall, wall and ceiling) function simultaneously, as it were, as the *edges* of individual film shots. Admittedly unlike the standard edges of film frames, they have irregular outlines but they nevertheless fulfil to perfection the basic functions of film shots.

The outline traced by the first line surrounds the figure as a whole; this is a 'full-length shot'.

The second line gives us the 'figure from the knees upward'.

The third, 'waist-length'.

And finally the fourth gives us a typical 'close-up'.

For purposes of greater clarity, let us go a little further and physically cut the picture up into a set of four shots. We will place them side by side and

check out the features (apart from the difference of scale) which distinguish them. To do so, let us separate these 'cut-outs' of the figure and study each one individually as an independent shot.

What, in general, distinguishes one shot from another, apart from the scale and the edges of the frame?

Above all, of course, the placing of the set-up.

Let us examine our 'shots' in sequence, from the viewpoint of . . . the setup.

From which point, if one may so express it, was frame No. 1 – 'full-length' – shot?

We see that in it the floor is not shown as just a narrow strip, but as a large, flat, dark grey surface, on which the hem of the dress is disposed around the figure as a broad black mass: the figure has clearly been shot *from above.*

Shot No. 2. 'Figure from the knees upward.' As it now appears in the cutout, the figure has been placed *parallel* to the wall on which the mirror is fastened. As for the set-up, this frame would have been shot *head-on.*

Shot No. 3. When this part of the picture is detached from the rest, we see the upper half of Yermolova's figure against a background of a certain spatial depth: when cut out with this particular framing, that space is no longer perceptible as being a reflection in the mirror. The depth provided by the mirror functions as the depth of an actual spatial background.

This is a typical and well-known case in film-making practice, when a relative impression of space is produced by means of simply altering the frame. But much more important in this instance is the fact that, due to the relative positioning of the figure, the walls and the ceiling, the figure in this 'shot' no longer appears to have been shot head-on: it has clearly been shot slightly *from below* (the ceiling can be seen overhanging the space above it).

Shot No. 4. The face is seen in close-up against a horizontal plane, which we know as the ceiling.

When is this kind of result produced in a shot?

Only, of course, when it is shot emphatically *from below.*

Thus we see that all four of the theoretical 'shots' of our sequence differ from each other not only in the *scale* of what they depict but in the *displacement* of the set-up (the points from which the object is viewed). Furthermore, this movement of the set-up strictly duplicates the process of gradual enlargement towards a close-up: as the object increases in size, the set-up moves consistently from an *overhead* set-up (A) to a *head-on* shot (B), thence to a set-up that is *partly below* (C), and the shooting finishes *from below* at the lowest possible point (D) (see Fig. 4.1).

If we now imagine shots 1, 2, 3 and 4 connected in a montage sequence, then it transpires that the eye has described a complete arc of 180 degrees. The figure has been shot in sequence from four different viewpoints, and the combination of these four points gives a sense of movement.

But *whose* movement?

We have already seen some instances of a combination of various phases

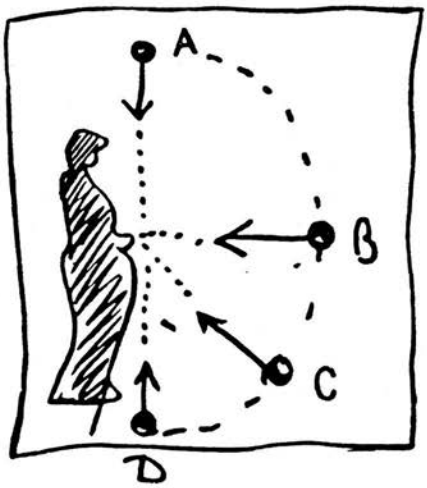


Fig. 4.1

of movement in which the eye traverses the *object* of the shots in one single movement. We may take as an example the montage of the three marble lions in a sequence of poses on the steps of Alupka Castle. Combined by montage, they give the illusion of a *single lion leaping to its feet.*[72]

Here we seem to have a similar case.

In this instance, however, is the effect of motion *of the figure itself* produced because its four sequential positions are perceived as four succeeding phases of movement, thereby resulting in the illusion of a continuous movement by the figure as a whole? This is the source of the dynamism to be found, for example, in the figures of Daumier and Tintoretto,[73] where the separate parts of a figure are disposed in accordance with the various phases of a single, continuous process of movement; the eye, as it travels over these separate phases of 'distributed' movement, involuntarily performs the leap from one phase to another and perceives this sequence of impulses as uninterrupted movement.

Exactly the same means are employed to create the basic effect of dynamism in cinematography, where the only difference is that the projector shows to the spectator, in sequence and in the successive phases, not just separate parts of the figure but the figure as a whole.

It is interesting to note that in order to convey movement *expressively*, the film-maker is not content to use this basic effect of cinematic dynamism alone; to transmit movement in a way that is gripping and expressive, the cinema has recourse to something similar to the method of . . . Daumier and Tintoretto. In this case – in montage editing – the cinema reverts to showing dynamics through the separate parts of a figure. The question, however, remains: is this the case in the portrait of Yermolova or not?

The answer, of course, is a categorical negative!

Because what has here been fixed on canvas is not a series of four successive positions of an object but four successive positions of *the eye of the observer.* Therefore these four points are not a function of *the behaviour of the object* (as with the aroused lion and Daumier's lively figures) but are a characteristic of *the behaviour of the spectator.* And this behaviour reveals itself in a movement from a viewpoint that is 'above' to one that is 'below' the figure, as though moving to a point . . . 'at the feet' of the great actress!

But the behaviour of the spectator can also be defined as the *attitude of the spectator*; or rather, it is the attitude imposed upon the spectator by the artist and it derives entirely from the attitude to the subject of the artist himself.

It is this – the artist's attitude – which obliges him to have recourse to the particular graphic structure which most fully expresses that attitude.

I think that if a line is capable in some way of expressing a thought and an attitude towards something (which it does here), the line of the viewpoint along the arc ABCD entirely corresponds to the idea of 'admiration' which one involuntarily feels when looking at the portrait of Yermolova.

But that is not all.

This basic 'tendency' in the overall composition of the portrait is reinforced by two more powerful means of influencing the spectator.

These are the spatial structuring and the use of colour (or rather the use of light), which also modulate in a downward arc along with the movement towards close-up and the shift of the 'set-up' from 'shot' to 'shot'.

A constant *expansion of space* takes place in the progression through shots 1, 2, 3 and 4.

No. 2 presses closely up against the wall with the mirror.

No. 3 is projected against the apparent depth of the room reflected in the mirror.

No. 4 stands out against a background of immense, boundless space.

Thus from shot to shot the ever-enlarging image of Yermolova herself dominates an ever-expanding space.

But at the same time the shots become progressively brighter.

No. 1 is completely dominated by the black mass of the dress.

In No. 2 the black part of the figure ceases to function independently, but instead tends to lead the eye towards the brighter area of the face.

In No. 3 the remaining areas of black now only cast shadows on the bright face.

In No. 4 the main part of the frame is wholly taken up with the face, which seems to glow from within.

This increase in the intensity of lighting from shot to shot, merging into a single uninterrupted process, is perceived as a *gradual brightening*, an *increasing illumination* and *animation* of the actress's face, which gradually advances out of the dim background of the picture.

Unlike the movement of the set-up, however, these two characteristics do not relate to any action by the spectator but to the apparent behaviour of

the subject portrayed: thanks to them, Yermolova seems illuminated by a growing inner fire and by the light of inspiration, and that inspiration seems to radiate on to the ever-growing number of her enthusiastic admirers.

Thus a reciprocal interplay is set up between the *admiration of the enthusiastic spectator* in front of the picture and the *inspired actress* on the canvas – in exactly the same way that the auditorium and the stage once merged as both were captivated by the magic of her acting. It is interesting that by his compositional method Serov expresses graphically almost *literally* the very same things that Stanislavsky says about Yermolova in words (I take the liberty of stressing those words which relate directly to our analysis): 'in each part that she played, M.N. Yermolova always conveyed a *special* spiritual image, which was unlike the previous one and unlike any other.'[74]

The chosen method of composition is undoubtedly 'special' and 'unlike any other'. The montage principle of composition used here is profoundly original and individual.

(Just what a disaster can result from failing to use a 'special' approach to the solution of a similar problem in painting we shall see from another example, also from the area of portraiture, which will be illustrated below.)

'The roles created by Yermolova live on in the memory *with an independent existence*, despite the fact that they were all *created from the same organic material*, from her *single spiritual personality*.'

It would be hard to find a more exact graphic equivalent of what has been said here than the way in which Serov has broken up the picture, as we have seen, into four parts that are autonomous yet which simultaneously continue to exist as a single, indivisible, organic whole!

Taken separately, these 'levels' are like the 'roles' which live on 'with an independent existence', while taken together they constitute the single organic whole of the 'full-length shot', i.e. 'her single spiritual personality'.

'All her movements, words, actions . . . were suffused with fire from within by an emotion that could be warm and gentle or fiery and thrilling.'

This is the same feeling that is conveyed with such perfection by the gradual lightening that occurs from level to level, on which we remarked above.

'For our generation . . . Yermolova was a symbol of . . . *strength, emotional power*, genuine *simplicity* and *modesty*.'

There is 'simplicity' and 'modesty' in the 'conventional', unpretentious painterly means that are used in the picture with such astonishing restraint, both in the pose of the actress and in the colour resolution of the portrait itself.

There is 'strength' in the enlarging of the face from level to level.

And finally, *emotional power* is conveyed as the *unity of opposites* within the compositional principle.

Like the *unity of the consecutive and the simultaneous.*

Like the *simultaneity* of the existence of the picture both as a *single whole* and as a *system of successively enlarging shots*, into which the picture breaks down and from which the picture is again reconstituted into a whole.

I am profoundly convinced that the compositional principle which we have analysed was not, of course, 'consciously' selected but arose for Serov purely intuitively. In no way, however, does this lessen the force of the strict logic of what he did in the composition of this portrait.

We are well aware of how long and agonisingly Serov struggled over the composition of his portraits; how much time he spent on ensuring that the visual solution of the *psychological* task which he set himself in the portrait should *wholly* correspond to the image that suggested itself to him at the meeting, or rather the 'confrontation', with the sitter.

I quote at random from his letters.

'You know, I think, that for me each portrait is like living through an illness' (1887, to his wife).

'This evening I shall try and sketch the princess (Yusupova – S.M.E.) in pastels and charcoal. I think I know how to do her, yet – I don't know; with painting you can never predict anything beforehand' (1903).

'And then if I concentrate on one thing – even if it's just Girshman's nose – I find I'm stuck up a blind alley' (1910).

'Well now, it seems that I have finished my paintings, although as always I could keep working on them, I suppose, for an eternity, or at least for half an eternity' (1903).

And above all there is the invariable, the principal, the fundamental theme: '*The chief thing is – how to capture the character of the sitter.*'

In this painful movement towards the fixing on canvas of the image floating dazzlingly and tantalisingly before the artist's eyes, the creative impulse gives rise to those amazingly complex and unyielding structures which later astonish us with their inevitability and immutability. [. . .][75]

Let us, however, return once more to the purely compositional aspect of the picture, whose effect has been to give us such a remarkably vital impression of the great Yermolova, and we shall find an astounding link with our initial example of the barricade. For there, too, two qualities emerged simultaneously: the depiction of a barricade together with a certain outline which revealed the essential, overall meaning of the barricade as an element in a struggle. By forcing the eye to follow its zigzags, the particular shape of that jagged line conveyed a *sense of conflict*. The feeling that it aroused was imprinted on our consciousness as the perception of a *struggle*. Every variation of the zigzag line AB from the straight line CD can be perceived as a thrust exerted on it from opposing sides, which with alternating success strike it at points d, d1, d2, d3, d4, d5 along the straight line and displace it towards points c, c1, c2, c3, c4, c5 (see Fig. 4.2). The 'alternation of success' may be seen from the adjoining column, which can be interpreted as a chart of the struggle between two forces.

Both sets of quantities are perceived simultaneously, and the result is the depiction of a barricade that is steeped in a feeling of struggle (not to be found to the same degree in a picture of a barricade which has not been treated in like manner).

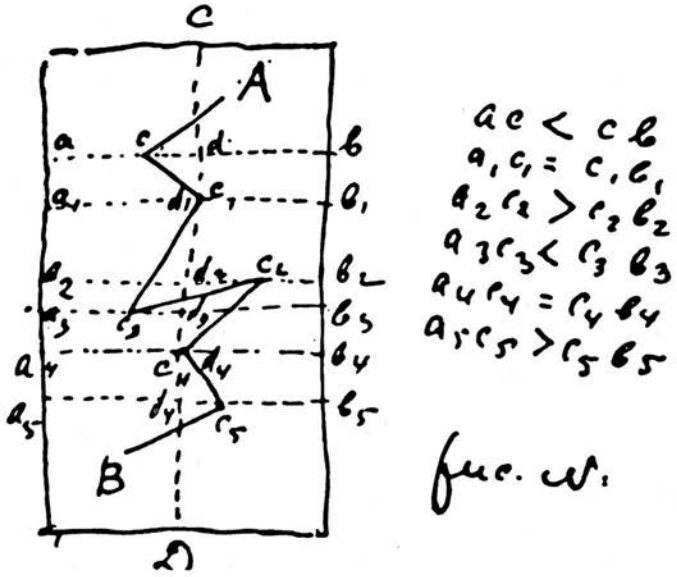


Fig. 4.2

In the portrait of Yermolova we have exactly the same thing – with the difference, of course, that the expressive message and the content of the drawing are not the same and the expressive aim is different. The variation between the two is not, however, limited to this.

The line CD is not actually drawn as such, nor even suggested, but is a line made up of a series of imaginary points that the eye follows as it moves; moreover, the plane of this imaginary line does not coincide with the plane of the picture, but is perpendicular to it (see Fig. 4.1 above). Yet at the same time the line also derives from a more profound perception of the subject matter than the mere visual registration of its outward appearance. This deeper perception is inextricably linked with a more profound interpretation of the picture: its *meaning* is made up of a detailed apprehension of the subject plus our individual attitude to it. For a scrap-dealer the barricade is by no means an image of struggle but is a collection of second-hand goods suitable for resale (a bed, armchairs, shop signs, barrels and so on), while for a tourist it represents a heap of potential souvenirs!

We see in the portrait a complete repetition of the same multi-level construct noted above.

There is one level which I have purposely not mentioned, although I have by no means forgotten it. I shall not analyse it, because it does not form part of the subject matter of this study; even so, it can do no harm to mention it. I refer, of course, to the most elementary positioning of the model – not *on the canvas* (with which we are mainly concerned) but *in front of the canvas*. I have in mind the model's *real-life behaviour*, and since this is inevitably

motionless, I mean the *pose* of the model. In the case of cinema this would include the actor's behaviour, mime, gesture and voice. We shall not deal with this theme here, but it should at least be stressed once more that the entire visual composition of the actor's screen existence should be in complete harmony with this factor. Each of these aspects derives inseparably from the other and, taken together, they both derive from the idea, theme and content of the screenplay. Almost exactly the same comment, in almost exactly the same words, is applicable to the pose of the painter's model. The pose must equally be a total, generalising image of the multiplicity of positions and movements that are characteristic of the sitter. We know that in this respect, too, Serov was meticulous and took as much trouble in placing his sitter in front of the easel as he did in positioning the portrait on the canvas. See how much careful thought has gone into the poses of the Gruzenbergs, Miss Gershelman or Lamanova. Or look at the pose of Yermolova herself. In the pose, of course, as in everything else about the picture there should also be a second level of generalisation, above and beyond any generalisation at the everyday, realistic level. I refer to the metaphor of pose and gesture (on which we have cited quotations from Engels and Gratiolet about people in action or actors), or rather the image – for example 'the image of the hero', 'the image of the leader', 'the image of the owner' or 'the image of the traitor' – which through the choice of pose and the use of the painter's medium should emerge from the straightforward anatomical depiction of the sitter.

Here, I think, lies the watershed between two different types of realists such as Serov and Repin.[76]

Repin stops at the point of realistic generalisation. Here he is truly great: how vividly the 'actors' in the scene of *Pushkin at the Examination* generalise their roles. A generalising image of wider import, however, is beyond his powers. If he attempts one, the result is either allegory (what spaciousness) achieved by the *setting* of the scene, or else such appalling paintings as his version of the 'inspired' Tolstoy (that full-length portrait of Tolstoy in which he is shown with arms slightly outspread and a face shining from within with a pink glow, like one of those paper lanterns used to illuminate a summer garden-party).

I have in mind Repin's portrait of Lev Tolstoy known by the title, *Tolstoy Renouncing Worldly Life*. It was painted in 1912 for the Moscow Society of Art and Literature. In it Repin set himself a task similar to that undertaken by Serov in his portrait of Yermolova. The portrait was an attempt to show the inner translucence, the other-worldly light shining within a great writer who has achieved the highest degree of spirituality.

We have observed the complex but consistent path followed by Serov in order to achieve his desired result by purely compositional and painterly means. Nor should we forget how Serov went to the extremes of 'asceticism' in his use of pictorial effects by omitting even the slightest gesture by Yermolova: everything is intended to concentrate the picture's effect on the great actress's inner spiritual resources ('Her unfathomable spiritual depths',

I.E. Repin: *Tolstoy Renouncing Worldly Life*

in the words of Stanislavsky). We have demonstrated above how consistently the sense of 'inward illumination' and 'inner light' were achieved in her portrait.

This is not Repin's method: he goes for it 'head-on', in a direct 'plain man's' fashion.

Whereas Serov – painting an *actress*, of all people – removed from his canvas everything theatrical, everything connected with the stage (up to and including such eloquent means of expression as gesture), not only does Repin above all emphasise gesture but *exaggerated* gesture – in other words, the pose. And who is his subject? One of the sternest of moralists and castigators of everything faked and theatrical, to say nothing of the merely false (one has only to recall Tolstoy's Savonarola-like intolerance of even Shakespeare). Yet here, with the artist trying so hard to be 'monumental', the great sage (so often drawn by Repin himself in his plain yet truly monumental everyday simplicity) suddenly becomes a 'saintly' little old man with his arms inanely stretched out at his sides!

Even worse, however, is the fact that Repin tries to convey the idea of 'inward illumination' equally simplistically, with head-on literalism. As a result, instead of the head of a great sage we have something like a Chinese lantern, with the simulacrum of a literal, physical source of light inside it, a source of light whose pink glow shines through a pink-tinted face!

One cannot help recalling the words of Chekhov . . .

> The beer was served. Gvozdikov sat down, lined up all six bottles in front of him and, with a loving glance at them, started to drink. After three glasses he felt as though a lamp had been lit inside his chest and another inside his head: he had such a feeling of warmth, brightness and wellbeing. . . .
>
> After the second bottle he felt that the light in his head had been put out and it was growing dark.[77]

And this portrait was painted seven years after Serov had achieved such a brilliant solution of an analogous problem!

The error of Repin's method lies in his wanting to convey the *generalised* theme, i.e. a theme extending beyond the limits of simple depiction, by purely *depictive* means. The result is a work of appalling falsity. We have seen that an aim which 'transcends' mere depiction – a generalisation *about* what is depicted – should employ means which transcend the artist's normal methods. We have seen this in the very primitive example of the barricade, where the expressive character of the compositional outline is utilised. We have seen this in equal degree in a perfect example: the portrait of Yermolova. Reread once more the passage which describes how this 'apotheosis' of the actress is realised, in particular the means whereby Serov achieves the sense of inner illumination of the face, as distinct from Repin's portrait of Tolstoy, where it has been attempted by crassly literal pictorial means, by a flat, empty picture

of the old man's head, lit from within as though by 'the light of thought'.

Our reaction to this approach can only, of course, be one of bewilderment. Compare it with the mastery by which something no less elusive – the sense of a ballerina's 'airiness' – is conveyed in [Serov's] portrait of Anna Pavlova merely by draughtsmanship and the use of background, for she is not depicted in flight when the quality of lightness would be conveyed by the pose itself. The same comments apply to pre-screen composition (in this respect the screen is, after all, only the more sophisticated brother of the painter's expanse of stretched canvas).

Here, too, *Yermolova* is equally perfect.

Let us repeat: what makes her portrait so expressive is the fact that we have before us in this picture the *simultaneous unity* of monumental *immobility* and a whole gamut of *dynamic movement*: the 'zoom' effect of ever-increasing close-ups; the growing movement of space and light; the shifting viewpoint in relation to the subject.

This combination of contradictions within a unity also contributes to producing that thrill which grips us whenever we are fortunate enough to live through a direct experience of the dialectical process. It is also interesting to observe that the effect has been achieved without a departure from realistic depiction, which, despite everything, retains its representational integrity. [. . .][78]

Let us return to *Yermolova* one last time and to that imaginary line joining up each successive viewpoint; this 'all-round observation' of the subject, which we remarked in the portrait of Yermolova is *exactly* what happens when we progress byond the limitations of single set-up cinematography! It is a precise illustration of how in montage the elements into which an event is broken up are reassembled into the montage image of that event. To describe this complex dual process, in 1933 I invented the term *mise en cadre* (in all respects analogous to the concept of *mise en scène*).[79]

We shall return to this subject when we move on to the next section. . . .

There only remains to draw one further generalising conclusion from the total phenomenon which we have investigated in such detail with all the examples given in the first section, and which stood out with particular force in the case of the portrait of Yermolova.

The simultaneity with which the construct exists at two levels – in the *whole* and in the *parts* – is the precise analogue of a fundamental characteristic of human perception in general, which has the ability to comprehend a phenomenon in two ways: *as a whole* and *in its details*; *immediately* and *in mediated form*; *complexly* and *differentially*. The terms we use depend on the area we choose to examine, but this peculiarity of human perception is to be found in equal degree in all aspects of man's activity and thought and it invariably permeates them. . . . At various periods of mankind's development, these two characteristics of perception have been distinct or separated from each other. Engels discussed this exhaustively in *Anti-Dühring*. Only when man reaches the appropriate age in his personal existence, in the existence of

his species (social development), and in the existence of his society (the stage of dialectical philosophy which characterises mankind in its maturity) does this separation merge into the unity of a new quality. The one-sidedness of the *child's* synthesising mode of thought becomes the *adult's* analytical thinking, having acquired the differential principle. In the same way the mind of *man at the dawn of culture* evolves into the *mind of man in the epoch of a developed culture*; similarly, philosophy develops from *primeval chaos* into *materialistic dialectics.*

The curious feature about this process, of course, is the following: synthesising perception is, of course, the lower stage of perception (*vide* Engels), whereas differential perception is a step forward (*vide* ditto). Observation which is capable of *generalising* is, of course, the highest type of all. (It figures in science as the *generalised concept*, in art as the *generalised image*, belonging in equal degree to the highest category of man's intellectual activity; provided, of course, that one is either consciously or intuitively directed towards the progressive development or advancement of social conditions, to the degree and in the direction permitted by the social epoch.)

Here a contradiction seems to arise: the highest stage – the generalised image – seems *in visual terms* to coincide with the most primitive type of synthesising perception. But this is only an apparent contradiction. In reality we have in this instance that very same 'apparent reversion to the older stage' which Lenin mentions in discussing the dialectics of phenomena. The fact is that generalisation is *a true synthesis*, i.e. simultaneously a synthesising (immediate) and a differential (mediated) perception of the event (and a perception *about* the event).

A generalisation from which the purely representational element has been removed would be a bare, non-objective abstraction dangling in mid-air. Such would be a third version of our barricade, so generalised as to be deprived not of the compositional outline (as distinct from the first version), but of the actual picture, and retaining only the 'image-expressing' zigzag line of its contour. All the 'pictorial' and 'expressive' qualities would instantly evaporate from the sketch, while the zigzag itself might not be interpreted as a barricade but as . . . *anything you like*: as a graph of the rise and fall of prices, or as a seismographic trace of subterranean tremors, and so on and so forth (see Fig. 4.3). It would be open to all these interpretations until the abstraction reverted (as in our case) to the representation of some concrete, objective subject matter.*

In a sketch that contains the full complement of elements, its main, fundamental characteristic is clear, namely that the effectiveness of our chosen examples rests on the fact that each element in them appeals to its own

*Here it is tempting to suggest a link with the Constructivists,[80] but the congruence would be incomplete and ineffective. The Constructivists aestheticised the physical structure of materials into a central theme of their work, to a greater degree than our examples of psychologically expressive structuring of a phenomenon.

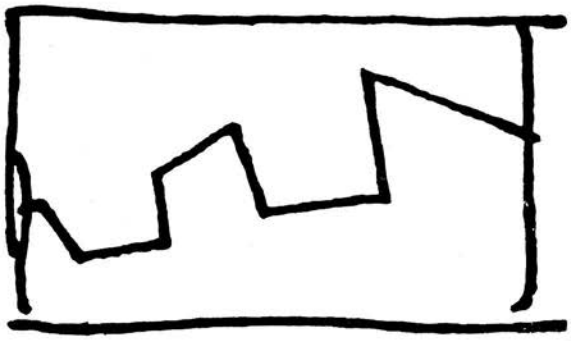


Fig. 4.3

particular part of our perception and that the combination of them appeals to the totality of our synthesising consciousness, drawing the spectator 'from head to foot' into its effect.

It is this characteristic of human perception, of course, which determines both the fact of the structure and the existence of precisely this kind of structure in any truly complete and perfect human artefact.

In this drawing *the nature of the artefact is a reflection of the characteristics of human consciousness – of Man – within its formal structure alone.* This will be *as much reflected in the form of the artefact* as the reflection of Man is the prime condition of a vital and meaningful *content of the artefact.*

Having noted this we should not forget it while dealing with the immediate problems of montage, because we shall return again to the principle we have just enunciated.

Post Scriptum

I don't like Repin. That, however, has nothing to do with my analysis of the method that made his portrait of Tolstoy such a disaster. In judging it so unfavourably I am in the company of Igor Grabar, a fervent admirer of Repin's painting. Although he does not analyse the reasons for the ugliness of this particular work by Repin, he does not mince words in his criticism of it. In a chapter significantly entitled 'Downhill', Grabar writes: 'But worst of all, it must be said, is the portrait commissioned in 1912 by the Moscow Society of Art and Literature, and which was entitled by the artist *Tolstoy Renouncing Worldly Life*'.[81]

I think this quotation disposes of any accusation that I am prejudiced in my criticism of this portrait:

> We now come to a most essential factor in Repin's work, *his lack of imagination* – not only in *The Zaporozhians* and *St Nicholas of M . . .* ,

but in all Repin's work in general. Lack of imagination need not be a drawback for an artist; it is sufficient to say that neither Velázquez, Frans Hals or Holbein had it. But they, with very rare exceptions, never tackled themes which were outside the range of their talents or beyond their ability; Repin, unfortunately, was attracted to just such themes: *Sofia*, *The Zaporozhians*, *St Nicholas*; later *Get Thee Behind Me, Satan*, and others. For topics such as these required the gigantic imagination of such an artist as Surikov. . . .

Three of Repin's characteristics determined the entire content of his painting – a lack of imagination, a passion for problems of expression, and a longing to depict complex processes of human action, movement and thought, chiefly as seen through their physical manifestations.[82]

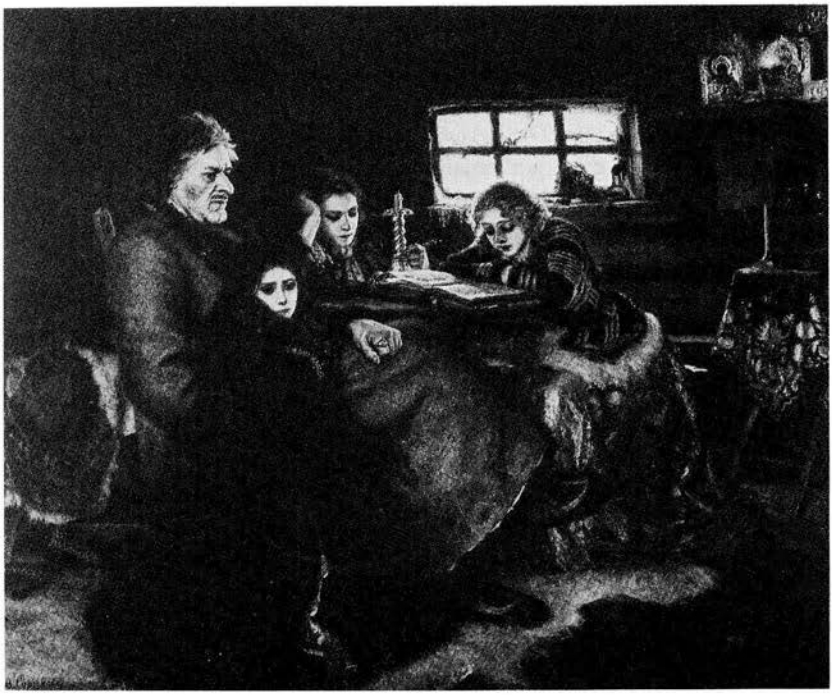
Let us allow ourselves to take the *literal* meaning of that missing trait: 'imagination'. I believe that it should least of all be interpreted in the sense of 'invention' or 'fantasy'. It has two main connotations: 1) an entering into the image of what is depicted, and 2) a transposition 'into image' of what you are depicting. Hence, the portraits of Repin are really, if anything, an 'atlas' (Grabar somewhere calls *The Zaporozhians* an 'atlas of laughter') of types and prototypes, features great and small taken from nature as though to compile a textbook for an actor who might wish to play them (that is why on my bookshelves monographs on Repin are to be found among the books that are of use to actors, not among the books on painting at all!), whereas Serov's portraits are like a gallery of uniquely *personified* images of living people, acted out by the artist. Later, when discussing El Greco, we shall again come across the case of the artist as actor, putting his own role-playing into his works.[83] But in this matter El Greco will not be in the same class as Serov, who was a master of absolute self-personification in the image he created, whereas El Greco transposes 'into himself' all the multiplicity of his subjects and models. It is to this second point, i.e. Serov's ability (and his method) not only to depict but to 'imagine' what he depicts, that the whole of this section on the Yermolova portrait is devoted. Comparing Serov to Repin only serves to consolidate our position, and it is further confirmed by the characteristic, mentioned by Grabar, of Repin's lack of imagination. [. . .][84]

I would not like to leave the subject of Repin without having defined more precisely what I mean about the nature of his art. No one will deny that the realistic figures which he *depicts* are typical. But the point is that his work as a painter is limited to representative depiction. Repin does not typify his subjects by simultaneously depicting the man and generalising his features into an image. Repin does something different: he copies from nature the features of people he has found who happen to be typical. Typicality is thus not achieved by artistic means but through the features of a model, conscientiously recorded by the painter. It is in this sense that the expression 'a well-set scene' was appropriate when we used it with reference to *Pushkin at the*

Examination, but apart from qualifying Repin as a skilful stage director we might also call him a good entrepreneur in the skill of type-casting his actors.

For the film-maker, it would be difficult to find a more exciting description of type-casting than that relating to another realist artist: Surikov, in particular the case of the mathematics teacher who turned out to be the perfect 'image' for Menshikov.[85] Surikov, however, differs from Repin in that he uses a large number of purely painterly means to create the image of a man and the image of the scene in which he is placed. The sense of 'enclosure' comes out with special force in one particular scene, which is also thematically linked with imprisonment or enclosure. And this theme in itself brings us back again to Menshikov, this time not to his physical prototype but to the picture of his exile in Beryozova.

Descriptions of dead bodies being transported over long distances usually create a very powerful impression: those coffins enclosed one inside the other



V.I. Surikov, *Menshikov at Beryozova*

– an oak coffin, then a lead coffin, a covering over the oak, a covering over the lead – as in the engravings of Napoleon in his coffin after the shipment of his body from the island of St Helena; the body seems outlined by the heavy, quadruple contour of the coffins, from the inside one to the plain outer box surrounding the inner layers. I don't know whether the image of Napoleon on St Helena was hovering in front of Surikov's mind's eye when he was painting his picture, but whenever I look at *Menshikov at Beryozova* I

involuntarily think of the prisoner of St Helena, whose wings have also been inexorably clipped by the walls of the tiny cottage, by the fence of the little surrounding garden, by the unyielding contours of the island itself and the vast watery space around it, to say nothing of the English guardships patrolling the coast: such are the images of Bonaparte alive (if such an existence can be called living) or of the dead Bonaparte encased in the fourfold outline of his coffins! And that, to me at least, is how Menshikov appears, with his passionate, unbending nature, as though buried alive and fettered by his Beryozova exile in four coffins which clasp him one after another in their embrace – with only the slight difference that his coffins are not physically real but are a metaphorical effect achieved by means of the 'concentric' rectangles of the composition which squeeze each other inwards.

In the centre of the composition is his tightly clenched fist, an image of the will-power by which he restrains his urge to hurl himself pointlessly into the fray. The fist is 'gripped' by the huddled group of his family, pressing closely in upon him for compositional reasons. The rough-hewn log walls of the cottage clasp the group in their turn. The dim light of a winter's day shines through the window, so that we sense that the cottage, too, is in the grip of frost, even before our eye is allowed to come to rest on the pitiless rim of the frame, which encloses the picture as a whole, reminding us of the famous prisoner in the reign of Louis XI, who for years was kept in an iron cage which allowed him neither to stand up nor so much as to straighten his back. With Surikov, this feeling stretches past the edges of his canvas and extends beyond this picture to others; *Menshikov* stands at the centre of a whole cycle, which includes *Boyarina Morozova* and *The Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy*, as distinct from another cycle linked by thematic unity – *The Capture of the Snowbound Town*, *The Conquest of Siberia* and *Suvorov Crossing the Alps*.

We shall find nothing analogous to this with Repin. In his pictures, typicality is achieved by other means; we have attempted to point out exactly what these means are. The typical as a simultaneous demonstration of both a phenomenon and a conclusion (generalisation) drawn from that phenomenon; the typical, fully realised so as to embrace both objective representation and generalised image: this is not within Repin's powers. And that, perhaps, is the reason why he is so strong as a purely representational painter and why he is so popular with those who are looking for realistic depiction above all. Here, too, perhaps is the secret of the diametrically opposite effect made by the two exhibitions, both held in the Tretyakov Gallery – one in 1934, the other in 1935 – the first showing Repin, the second Serov. The general impression produced by each exhibition as a whole repeated in reverse the effect of comparing the separate, individual works. Each one of Serov's pictures, in its typicality and in its unexcelled ability to express character, surpasses Repin. The ensemble of the Repin exhibition – as a comprehensive, all-embracing 'portrait of the epoch' – far outdoes Serov's incomparable gallery of faces, through each *separate* one of which there speaks the whole epoch. Why is this? I think it is precisely because a generalisation within a

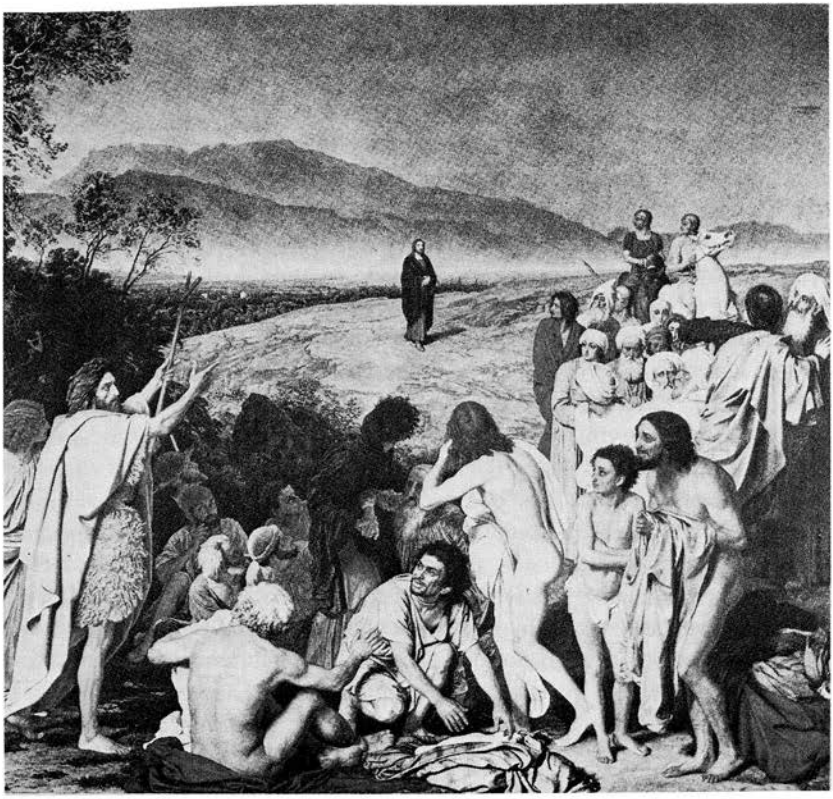
picture, i.e. the element which goes beyond the limits of representation, is inaccessible to Repin; that everything he depicts, whether it is a pure tone or a pure colour, is taken directly from nature. He never succeeds in mediating a generalising statement on canvas. Only in the multitude (the unrestrained abundance of Repin's paintings sanctions the use of this archaism to indicate their quantity!) of the total collection can there emerge a generalisation, of whose features each separate picture is no more than a single *stroke.* With Serov nothing like this occurs: each portrait, each picture by Serov is its own world, capable of containing an idea in all its dimensions. *The Rape of Europa* alongside *The Girshmans*, *Lamanova* alongside *Peter* [the Great] remain autonomous worlds that do not merge with each other; whereas [Repin's] *The Church Procession* has much in common with his *Ivan the Terrible*, and nothing prevents *St Nicholas of Myra* from combining with the portrait of Rubinstein and *The Archdeacon* to form a general physiognomy of the period. This applies to Repin's entire *opus.*

Interestingly enough, the same thing occurs with the cycles of paintings within his total *œuvre.* His cycles are not of the Surikov type, that is to say they are not unified by linking images. With Repin, the cycles are formed by unity of subject matter. Most interesting in this regard is the case of one of Repin's last works, in which a cycle is made up of separate paintings intended to form part of one joint picture. These exist both as a cycle of several portraits and as the large work containing them all. Amazingly, whereas the collection of individual paintings produces the most striking impression, the picture which incorporates them all leaves us quite cold. Wherein lies the secret? In the fact that the work which unites them in one is a mere *collection*, a mere process of sticking them into one common *picture*, and is not a *generalisation* into a single whole. Let me reveal that I am referring to Repin's picture *The State Council*, which is shown to the spectator in two forms – both as a completed picture and as a collection of superb portrait sketches, the studies that were made in preparation for the big picture.

The effect of the big picture is to leave us more than indifferent (not only because of the theme!) but basically because of its qualities of artistic composition – or rather because of its total lack of them. A glance at the great variety of the individual studies conveys an astounding effect, so strong, in fact, that I still recall the impression which they made on me the first time I saw them, and that was a long time ago, before the war, at the exhibition on the Field of Mars in Petersburg where they had their first public showing. Readers may make their own judgments on my age and the distance in time! I saw these sketches for the second time at the Repin exhibition of 1934, but this time alongside the completed picture. I tested my recollection of it, and was not only convinced that it was right but I think I also defined the secret of why the two forms of the work made such differing impressions. The fact is that when the spectator runs his eye over the individual portraits, he forms a generalised image: that of the collective face of the State Council, which comes across so clearly through the features of its members that there also

emerges the face of the regime of which they are the supreme executives. Nothing of the sort comes out of the group picture itself. The figures and features are transplanted into it from the separate portraits in exactly the same way that spectators are seated in an auditorium – according to the numbering of their tickets – only here they are disposed according to rank, i.e. on grounds dictated by governmental statutes and decrees and not by artistic criteria at all.

Why is it that in the big picture the faces do not merge into a collective image? It is because in a picture that generalising aspect and image have to be given by the artist himself. If he fails to provide it, the spectator is disorientated, and in order for him to assemble the elements of the picture into his own overall conception or generalising image, he must take the finished picture apart, break it up into fragments and then consciously reassemble them; in other words he must do a 'home-made' version of . . . the preparatory sketches, in which the artist's *strictly pictorial* mode of combining them – which goes no further than spacing out the individual figures! – at least does not disturb his own imaginative combination of his figures! The conclusion to be drawn is that the combination of the *separate portraits* on *pictorial* grounds not only fails to provide any new generalising, interpretative element but even deprives them of that expressive force which, in each separate portrait, derived from the spectator's need to perceive each one mentally in a *montage-like* relationship with all the others. It is this compositional montage – this process of grasping the whole in a single action and simultaneously subordinating it to a rhythm which would define and generalise the theme of that action – that Repin the artist has failed to do. Please do not think that I am making some kind of 'leftist', anti-realist demand: accusations of the kind I have made above cannot be made against the densely peopled canvases of Surikov (*Boyarina Morozova*), of Alexander Ivanov (*Christ Appearing to the Multitude*),[86] or of Leonardo da Vinci (*The Last Supper*). It is significant that *Christ Appearing to the Multitude*, which is also on view to the public as both a collection of individual heads and as a complete picture, *in no way* produces the effect that we have observed in the case of Repin. With Ivanov the individual heads are separate and are simply interpreted as disconnected portraits (one of the surprising features being that the head of Christ is copied from the [same artist's] head of Apollo). Yet the true power of a dynamic image emerges when these same heads, in the implacable hands of the painter, force the spectator to perceive an expressive image in the unique compositional structure with which he has linked them all. The whole scope of Ivanov's mastery of composition stands out with particular clarity in his sketches illustrating the scriptures, in which there are some quite unforgettable pictures such as *The Stoning* [of the woman taken in adultery] and others. The fact remains that with Repin the generalising factor is not to be found within one picture but in the combination of a number of pictures, a process which the artist himself fails to carry out when putting them on to one canvas. Either the resulting picture does not work at all (as with The State Council) or the outcome is what happened in the portrait of Tolstoy.



A.A. Ivanov, *Christ Appearing to the Multitude*, detail

Clearly I am not alone in reacting to *The State Council* in the way described above. N. Radlov, for instance, writing on a quite different topic, namely Repin's painting technique, has this to say when referring to 'the group of works in which . . . the nature of Repin's talent stands out most plainly and obviously. These are', in Radlov's opinion, 'Repin's studies for *The State Council*'. He goes on to say:

> In both the ends and the means of pictorial representation this work entirely reflects Repin's talent and strength. These are a series of characteristic [portraits], seized rapidly and immediately, as was demanded by the shortness of the sittings, and therefore devoid of any attempt at typification or drawing theoretical conclusions. The method used here by the artist is one of simplified tonal distinctions without any attempts at expressive colouring or sophisticated draughtsmanship.[87]

Thus Repin's 'talent and strength' lie in the graphic 'immediacy' of what he records. His drawings, free of 'typification' and 'theoretical conclusions', i.e. of generalisation by artistic means, best correspond to his 'talent and

strength'. The other characteristics mentioned – the *simplified* tonality, the lack of pretensions to expressing colouring, and the *unsophisticated* draughtsmanship – all mean that the studies not only create a generalised image by virtue of their *function*, but that on *structural and technical* grounds they are typical 'montage' fragments.

What has been written in this and subsequent chapters, incidentally, lies completely outside the scope of Part One, and for a full clarification of this passage it would do no harm to reread it alongside the explanations which I shall be giving in Part Two, where I shall refer to the way in which the montage image is created. The comments made in this passage serve as additional illustration to Part Two itself.

Here let us conclude our analysis of Repin with a final thought. A generalised image of Tolstoy, worthy of the methods used by Serov, which Repin failed to create in the portrait we have analysed, nevertheless does exist in Repin's *œuvre*. But where? It is to be found in the generalising image and representation of Tolstoy which emerges from the loving, heartfelt sketches and pictures in which Repin has purely graphically caught the great old man at a number of separate moments. In these innumerable works Repin managed to fix pictorially one *single* characteristic of Tolstoy at a time, catching *one* feature in each picture or sketch. The graphic artist can ask no more.