AS A RUSSIAN SAW US IN 1812

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In 1811, only a year before Russia was threatened by Napoleon, as she is today by Hitler, Pavel Petrovich Svinin, probably the first Russian commentator on American affairs, arrived in Philadelphia as secretary to his nation's Consul General in the United States. After a twenty months’ stay, during which he traveled from Virginia to Maine, he returned to Europe with the belief that "no two countries bear a more striking resemblance than Russia and the United States," and a desire to promote a mutual understanding between them. To this end, he took with him copious notes from which he prepared various magazine articles and a volume entitled *A Picturesque Voyage in North America*, published in St. Petersburg in 1815. He took with him also a portfolio of fifty-two water-color drawings in which he had recorded our manners and customs in the early republican era as Currier and Ives with their prints did in the Victorian age.

After more than one hundred years, these drawings were rescued from oblivion by an American Red Cross worker in Russia shortly after the Revolution of 1917. A few years later they passed into the collection of the late R. T. H. Halsey and have recently been acquired by the Museum, where they have been on exhibition for several months. By a dramatic coincidence Svinin's writings on America came to light almost simultaneously with Mr. Halsey's acquisition of the drawings, when H. M. Lydenberg and Avrahm Yarmolinsky of the New York Public Library, traveling in Russia, stumbled upon a volume of the Picturesque Voyage. Convinced of its unusual interest, Dr. Yarmolinsky set out to identify its hitherto unheard-of author. It was coincidence again that brought Mr. Halsey and Dr. Yarmolinsky together and made their findings known to one another for the first time. All that is known of the interesting Russian diplomat, author, and artist is the result of the painstaking research of these men.

Svinin was born in 1787, and after attending the School for the Nobility in Moscow and the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg he entered the diplomatic service at the age of eighteen. He was dispatched on a man-of-war which was to join the Russian fleet in the Adriatic and set out to see the world; for despite its military nature the voyage was a leisurely one. Years later Svinin wrote how he saw for the first time the Scandinavian countries, visited England, and sought out and explored all the legendary sites in the Mediterranean. And after the Treaty of Tilsit, by which Napoleon and Alexander agreed to make peace and to divide the world between them—although treaties seem to have been of no longer standing then than now—Svinin had occasion to visit the European countries by returning overland to Russia from Lisbon. Svinin was not so dazzled by the sights, however, as to neglect contemporary affairs. With a keen mind and observing eye he delved into politics and economics and developed that interest in social and economic conditions which distinguishes his writings on America.

Only a few years after its first appearance the Picturesque Voyage in North America went into its second Russian edition and was soon translated into German and Dutch. Books about America had long been popular with Europeans who either contemplated immigration and wanted to inform themselves about their future home, or, with an eye toward profits in the American trade, were eager to improve their knowledge of American tastes. For the most part these books were written either by French travelers inclined to overenthusiasm for the young nation that welcomed French refugees and had recently freed herself from France’s traditional enemy, or by Englishmen still embittered by the Revolution and reluctant to see any good in the rebellious
“Worldly folk” questioning chimney sweeps before Christ Church in Philadelphia and an oyster barrow in front of the Chestnut Street Theatre. Water colors by Svinin
states. Svinin's feelings were pro-American but not blindly so. As a Russian he was better able to judge us with a detached eye, and although he was only twenty-four at the time he came to America that eye had been well trained by his earlier travels. Moreover, as a competent artist and a member of the Academy of Fine Arts at St. Petersburg, he was equipped to paint what he saw as well as write about it, and his book was illustrated with engravings after six of his water colors.

Upon his arrival here Svinin was struck by the resemblance between his fatherland and America, two countries, he noted, where "the unfortunate and persecuted find an asylum and a home." He draws a parallel, also, between American toleration and the Russians' respect for the religion of others. Svinin hastened to break down the erroneous impressions created by "the ridiculous wonders and falsehoods" related by former travelers in the two countries, and while still in America he published essays about Russia accompanied by engravings of views of Moscow and St. Petersburg. To promote a broader understanding of the United States in Russia Svinin treated a variety of subjects both in his writings and in his paintings of America; and, unlike many of the travel writers who either confined themselves to a single aspect or, in the enumeration of details, failed to see the forest for the trees, Svinin attempted to interpret his observations and estimate their significance.

America's genius for industrial production, which is so emphasized today, was already apparent to Svinin. "The incredibly rapid headway made by this country . . . seems more like a dream than a reality." He noted that necessity as the mother of invention had performed amazing feats; lack of capital and shortage of low-priced labor forced the Americans to develop machines to the utmost of their ability. Not without a little of the exaggeration that he was careful to criticize in others, he claims that "mechanical inventions have completely replaced human hands in the United
States.” The invention at which the Russian marveled most was the steamboat, and he was quick to appreciate its significance and its great value to Russia. In his country’s interest, and probably a little in his own, he tried to secure the monopoly for its construction in Russia, but it was granted instead to Robert Fulton, the inventor.

Svinin was an admirer of our theory of government and its insistence upon the “rights of true liberty and happiness.” In this respect he thought it excelled all the ancient and modern republics. He found it, however, less successful in practice than in theory; he feared the effects of the bitter rivalry between the two political parties, the Federalists and the Democrats, and was shocked at the corruption to which it led. Svinin was more pleased with democracy as it applied to education, but it must be admitted that his glowing account of our public school system is not among his most accurate. Unfortunately, the number of illiterates in our country contradicts sharply Svinin’s belief that every American “studies the geography of his country, knows the rudiments of arithmetic and has a general idea about other sciences.” On the other hand, his assertion that “you should not look for profound philosophers and celebrated professors in America” would not go unchallenged today.

The variety of sects and races within the United States accounted to Svinin for our lack of any traits that could be called peculiarly American, although he conceded to us a certain liveliness of spirit and considered us more affable and hospitable than the English. His admiration for the way in which Quaker and Methodist, Indian and Negro lived at peace within the republic led him to study their beliefs and customs. He praised the humanness of the Quakers and predicted the complete emancipation of the slaves. He predicted also that the Indians, whom he likened to Caucasian mountaineers, would “vanish before the superiority of the white men.”
Svinin’s diplomatic duties, despite the war abroad and our own struggles in the War of 1812, were apparently slight in comparison with those of our hard-pressed statesmen today. He arrived in this country in the fall of 1811 and left in June 1813; yet in so short a period he found time not only to travel but also to attend, while in Philadelphia, his headquarters, every kind of function from academy exhibition to revival meeting.

Although soon to be overshadowed by prosperous New York, as Svinin predicted, at the time of his visit Philadelphia was our principal city and not a few of his drawings are devoted to describing its buildings and inhabitants. He painted the “worldly folk” in all their finery questioning chimney sweeps before historic Christ Church, young men with their ladies eating oysters at night in front of the Chestnut Street Theatre, and members of the fashionable City Troop gathered in their brilliant uniforms. Frenzied Negro Methodists are shown holding a religious meeting in an alley and meditative Quakeresses, “distinguished,” according to Svinin, “by fine figures and small feet,” walk by the Arch Street Meeting House. The Bank of Pennsylvania provides the background for a group of animated Negroes chopping wood in the street, and in front of the United States Bank boys pelt snowballs at a fashionably dressed group in a sleigh. When Svinin used his brush it was to give more graphic and instantaneous expression to these multiple sights, which he described with his pen a few years later, and the portfolio of water colors is characterized by the same variety of subject and approach that marks his writings.

Svinin had occasion to become well acquainted with the manner of travel in the United States. Many of the historic buildings that appear in his drawings are still in use,
but the vehicles in which he traveled have long since been banished to the scrap pile or stand motionless in museum halls. Among the most amusing of the drawings are those that depict the vicissitudes of travel on a rough road in a four-horse stagecoach or crossing the Susquehanna River in a chaise precariously balanced on a flat-bottomed boat. Merrymaking at a Wayside Inn is a reminder of the days when it was an overnight trip from Philadelphia to New York, and the variety of activity on the deck of a steamboat, probably the Paragon, brings to mind a Sunday outing on a Hudson River Day Boat.

At the same time that Svinin studied our institutions and speculated on our industrial development he marveled at our scenery. The romantic nature that had thrilled to the legendary scenes of the Mediterranean was almost overcome by Niagara Falls. "Having somehow climbed onto the wild cliff which fronts the cataract," he wrote, "I hasten to collect my thoughts which are stirred like this very chasm, to unburden my panting breast, to free myself from the spell cast by the falls." He painted them more than once as well as other natural wonders and idyllic landscapes showing distant cities bathed in sunlight. With a nostalgia for past greatness he selected as worthy subjects General Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon and the monument at Weehawken (since removed) to Alexander Hamilton, erected on the spot where he fell in his duel with Aaron Burr.

Svinin's writings deal with a variety of topics varying in importance from our governmental policies to the charms of the Quakers, and for his drawings he picked subjects as diverse as the thundering falls at Niagara and a simple piece of Indian pottery. Consistently enough, the drawings vary almost as much in style as they do in subject matter.
While his landscapes are generalized and loosely painted and their details subordinated to the impression, his drawings of buildings at times approach those of an architect in their linear precision. The colors are generally subdued and soft, but bright accents are used to give dash to the City Troop’s uniforms.

Svinin was an admirer of England and particularly of her art. Although it was her portraitists and landscape painters that he chose to praise specifically, he could hardly have missed the numerous paintings and prints, always so popular in England, which described and satirized her life and daily customs. The Philadelphia street scenes are suggestive of Wheatley’s “Cries of London” and a group portrait of Indian heads recalls similar compositions by Hogarth.

There is more tangible evidence of the effect of our American artists on Svinin. For a general view of Niagara Falls he drew from a sketch by the ornithologist Alexander Wilson. Fourth of July in Centre Square, Philadelphia, is an exact copy of an oil painting by John Lewis Krimmel, and his portraits of an Osage warrior and chieftain were not drawn from life but copied from water colors by his French contemporary, Saint-Mémin, whose work enjoyed great popularity in this country.

Despite his indebtedness to certain American artists Svinin was sparing in his praise of our achievements in the fine arts. Portraiture was the branch which he thought had been “brought to the highest degree of perfection” and probably because of the Americans’ disposition to vanity; in the field of landscape painting we could not boast of a single master. Sculpture, he found, consisted “largely in the making of marble slabs for fireplaces, porches, window sills, and funeral monuments.” Although he calls New York’s City Hall “a truly beautiful building” which “could indeed be an ornament to any of the foremost capitals of Europe,” he was not impressed by our architectural progress and says, somewhat inconsistently, that the Bank of Pennsylvania, one of the earliest examples of the Greek Revival, “is the only building in the United States which exhibits taste and proportion.” Svinin was, however, optimistic for our future artistic development, believing that “the Americans have by nature a great gift for the Arts.”

The quotations in this article are from Picturesque United States of America, 1811, 1812, 1813 . . . a Memoir on Paul Svinin . . . by A. Yarmolinsky with an introduction by R. T. H. Halsey. This book contains the only English translations of Svinin’s writings.