

In Search of Russian Borzoi Art



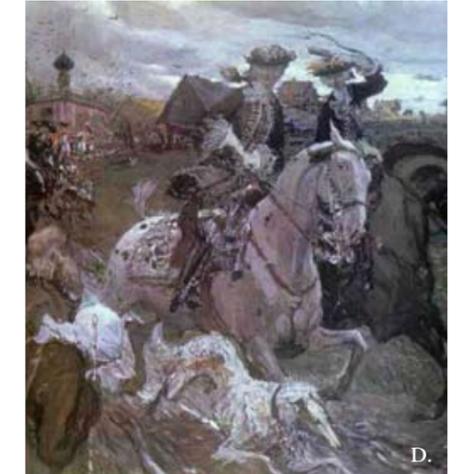
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During the 2008 International Borzoi Conference in Saint Petersburg, Russia I had the good fortune to tour several palaces and museums. Like everyone else, I was on the look-out for signs of Borzoi in the motherland. Oddly enough (at least to intrepid Borzoi fans like ourselves) sightings were few and far between. Nonetheless, I offer the following works of art.

A. "Hunting Scene with Borzoi" Artist unknown. This stunning oil painting graces the main hallway of Alexander Palace, home of the last Czar, Nicholas II. Like many pieces, it was likely created specifically for this palace and probably for a specific room. The image is a bit distorted due to the fact that the docents refused to allow even one of us past the velvet rope. So careening over two crabby women who ill appreciated the excitement this painting elicited from our group, I took the best shot possible. Besides the pair of Borzoi, one can see various packs of dogs such as Elkhounds, St. Bernards, and Foxhounds (used to flush prey from hiding) in this impressive entourage.

B. "Tobacco-Pipe" Artist unknown. 2nd half of the 19th century. This intricately carved pipe is made of Baltic amber and meerschaum and hails from Western Europe. Amber was much valued as an ornamental material as evidenced by Peter the Great's famous Amber Room. Meerschaum is a soft white mineral sometimes found floating on the Black Sea and suggestive of sea-foam. When smoked, Meerschaum pipes gradually change color to shades of yellow, orange, and red. One can imagine a landed gentleman appreciating a smoke with this fine pipe after a day hunting wolf, fox, and hare.

C. "Borzoi After Dinner" by Sergej Alexandrovic Mako (1885-1953) was painted in 1914 and hangs in the sumptuous Yussupov Palace (most famous for the plot and murder of Rasputin). Clearly table surfing was as familiar a trait then as it is today. The Yussupovs, one of the wealthiest families in Russia, were great hunting enthusiasts and kept Borzoi. The charm of this quiet scene belies the brewing discontent that would spawn the Russian revolution only 3 years later.



D. "Peter II & Tsarevna Elizaveta Hunting w/Hounds" by Valentin Serov (1865-1911), the most acclaimed Russian portrait artist of his day. The allure of the hunt inspired Serov to paint many historic scenes some 160 years after Elizabeth was crowned Empress. An avid rider and enthusiastic supporter of hunts, Elizabeth regularly hosted hunts at her Tsarkoe Selo estate. Again, one has a glimpse of the pomp and pageantry, the lengthy entourage, and highly appointed mounts and riders involved. Peasants stop to watch the procession and even the crows are stirred, adding to the drama and dynamic motion of the canvas.

E. "Borzoi on Settee" Artist unknown. This charming oil, likely of a favorite pet, is also at the Yussupov Palace. The artist's use of contrasts—wavy tail hair with rococo detailing and white with black—evokes a bit of romanticism. Prince Felix Yussupov (Rasputin's murderer) wrote in his memoir *Lost Splendor*, "I liked to gallop through fields and woods with my borzois on a leash. The dogs often spotted game before I did, and gave such leaps and bounds that I had difficulty in keeping my seat."

F. "Peter's First Hunting with Hounds" by Valentin Serov painted (1902) is displayed in the Russian Museum. Serov depicts a less elegant view of the hunt. If you look closely, the men on the left are laughing at a fallen rider (Peter?) who is helped off the snowy field having been unseated by his horse (seen in the distance galloping away). The Borzoi wants no part of the calamity and heads in the other direction.

G./H. "Borzoi Studies" sketched in 1902 by Valentin Serov probably as studies for the aforementioned painting.

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