Fallen Womanhood and Modernity in Ivan Kramskoi's Unknown Woman (1883)

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Fallen Womanhood and Modernity in
Ivan Kramskoi’s Unknown Woman
(1883)

Trenton B. Olsen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Fallen Womanhood and Modernity in Ivan Kramskoi’s Unknown Woman (1883)

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Master of Arts

My thesis investigates Ivan Kramskoi’s well-known work Unknown Woman (1883). In reviewing the criticism concerning Unknown Woman written in the wake of the eleventh peredvizhniki exhibition in which it was first shown, Kramskoi’s painting attracted praise, perplexity, and condemnation. One of the major interpretations (though not commonly discussed) was that this work was meant to allude to female sexuality or prostitution in Russian society. The purpose of my thesis is to reinstate the pertinence of this reading, one which has been obfuscated or ignored in the majority of ensuing twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship. The second purpose of this work is to explore some of the ambiguities and complexities inherent in this work in order to better understand some of the complexities facing modernizing Russian society. It is perhaps impossible to state Kramskoi’s motivations for painting this work or his attitude towards his subject concretely, but as I will suggest, he experienced both attraction toward and apprehension of the sexuality of his subject. However, this anxiety was also combined with a desire to invoke recognition if not empathy for the plight of the individual prostitute, a desire which can be found in other artistic productions of the age. In addition to Kramskoi’s motivations in creating this work, I look at the way this work indicates the social issues of late nineteenth-century Russia. This was a time where ideas of national identity, class, and gender roles were in flux due to the developments of modernity. Unknown Woman encapsulates the complexity of this social milieu, and I examine the largely overlooked elements of the woman’s gaze, wardrobe and physical location in order to better understand the questions and persuasions that existed in this period of late nineteenth-century Russian modernity.

Keywords: Kramskoi, peredvizhniki, prostitution, modernity, ambiguity, Russian empire
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Introduction

In the spring of 1883, Ivan Kramskoi displayed his complex and intriguing painting *Unknown Woman* (*Neizvestnaya*) (fig. 1) in the eleventh *peredvizhniki* (“Wanderers”) exhibition held in the halls of the Imperial Academy in St Petersburg. The lone woman depicted in the image is centered in the middle of the canvas and leans back into the plush interior of a two-person carriage. In the snowy background, the discernible details of equestrian statues on the Anichkov Bridge significantly indicate the location of the woman along the famous Nevsky Prospekt.¹ The image of the woman is closely cropped and shown from a low angle, casting her upper torso and facial features in sharp relief against the hazy atmosphere of approaching dusk on a winter night. The softened pink sky provides a velvety backdrop against which the sharp focus of the woman’s facial features and the sumptuous fabrics of her dark and elegant European attire are highlighted. The fine deep blue velvet of her cap is enriched by a large plume of white ostrich feathers, ornamented with pearls. Her matching blue velvet coat is lined with a soft fur trim that sensuously brushes against her round face. The folds in the satin bows around her collar and muff catch the waning daylight, and a bit of light also gleams off of the surface of the golden bracelets peeking out from under her cuff. As the woman settles into her space in the carriage, she peers down into the street, simultaneously arresting and implicating the gaze of an unseen figure in pictorial space, and by extension the viewer in real space.

The original reception of *Unknown Woman* ranged from acclaim to condemnation. By analyzing this literature, one can begin to understand that *Unknown Woman* is composed of ambiguous signs and markers that went unnoticed by some critics, while eliciting ardent reactions from others. But of those who interpreted allusions to female sexuality or prostitution

¹ С.Н. Гольдштейн, Иван Николаевич Крамской Жизнь и Творчество (Москва: Искусство, 1965), 220.
in Kramskoi’s painting, or saw the image as a sharply accusatory work that “criticized modern society and its morals,”² very few discussed the woman herself, failing to mention what signs and markers facilitated such a reading.

These critiques seem to have established a general approach to Unknown Woman in which twentieth- and twenty first-century scholarship has likewise overlooked the critical message and social context of Unknown Woman. Contemporary discourse has focused instead on Kramskoi’s potential relationship with the model, the woman’s beauty, or finding out her identity.³ Additionally, the cursory scholarship on this work has been performed almost exclusively in Russian, receiving essentially no critical attention in Anglo-American publications.

With my thesis I hope to accomplish two aims. The first is to provide fresh insight into Unknown Woman by looking beyond formal analysis or speculation concerning the identity of the model. Although a few critics commented on the implication of fallen womanhood in this painting, the true status of this woman is masked by her luxurious attire and intriguing gaze. So while this provides for an ambiguity and complexity in understanding the role of the woman in this work, I will explore the markers in the image and in society that led some to read this as an image of a courtesan. The social contexts of late nineteenth-century Russia, as well as the indications of female sexuality reflected in Unknown Woman have been ignored or obfuscated for so long that the reading of Unknown Woman as a courtesan is not currently widely circulated. I therefore seek to contribute to the interpretation of this work by restoring the reading of

² Гольдштейн, Крамской. 220.
³ См. Н.Ф. Лапунова, Иван Николаевич Крамской (Москва: Искусство, 1964); С.Н. Гольдштейн, Иван Николаевич Крамской Жизнь и Творчество (Москва: Искусство, 1965); Игорь Долгополов, Мастера и Шедевры в 3-х томах II Том (Москва: Изобразительное искусство, 1987); Т.И. Курочкина, Иван Николаевич Крамской (Ленинград: Художник РСФСР, 1989); И.В. Чуприна, О реальной основе некоторых произведений И.Н. Крамского и И.С. Тургенева (Саратов: Издательство Саратского Университета, 1994); Н. Надольская, ed., Иван Крамской (Москва: Белый Город, 2000); Андрей Лазарев, Крамской (Москва: Белый Город, 2008).
*Unknown Woman* as a fallen woman. But were that my sole objective, my contribution would not extend much beyond the somewhat shallow or narrow interpretations that have dominated the discourse for more than a century. Commenting on the heroine of Kramskoi’s painting, one critic profoundly stated “It is unknown who this woman is, respectable or venal, but in her sits an entire epoch”\(^4\)—it is this sentiment that I aim to qualify. I see the *Unknown Woman* not merely as an image of a courtesan, but rather as an indicator of a nation in flux. A rising sentiment of nationalism spread throughout many of the European countries in the late nineteenth century, and Russia was no exception. However, the celebration of aspects of culture and society that were uniquely Russian clashed against the adoption of foreign modernization and structures woven into the empire since the seventeenth century. Debates between the Slavophiles and Westerners extended throughout the nineteenth century, but became more critical in the period leading up to the Russian Revolution. Prostitution itself was viewed as a Western institution which had seeped into Russia as a consequence of Westernizing reforms. *Unknown Woman* was painted in the midst of tumults spilling through Russian society, and as I will argue, truly does reflect many issues at the heart of this society during the period growing modernity. The second purpose of my thesis, therefore, is to examine the social and historical context surrounding this painting in order to display the ways that her European wardrobe, confrontational gaze, urban context, and emphasized yet confident sexuality make her a marker and criticism of modernity. By these elements, *Unknown Woman* signifies an entire epoch—the rise of modernity and the tensions it wrought in the stability of class, gender and national identity in the late Russian empire.

\(^4\) This and all subsequent translations are the author’s unless cited in conjunction with an English publication. П. Боборыкин, “Крамской и Репин,” *Новости и Биржевая Газета*, 24 Марта 1883, 1-2.
In order to first reinstate an understanding of *Unknown Woman* as an image of a courtesan, I will examine the literature of its initial reception. The majority of critics who discussed Kramskoi in conjunction with the eleventh *peredvizhnik* exhibition did so to praise Kramskoi’s skill as a portraitist. The few who did mention *Unknown Woman* generally floundered in shallow discussion of the work’s formal properties. I submit that some of these reviews indicate a general discomfort in engaging with the content and purpose of Kramskoi’s canvas, attempting to subvert that discomfort by concentrating either on the woman’s beauty or on Kramskoi’s technical abilities as an artist.

Crucial context to understanding the reactions of these critics comes from understanding the world of prostitution as a part of modernity in Russian society at the end of the nineteenth century. *Unknown Woman* encapsulates the milieu and tension of this period because of the way prostitution was associated with a Western influence. I will explore Kramskoi’s portrayal of his *Unknown Woman* to suggest an ambivalence that he likely felt towards his subject. While it seems that Kramskoi wished to criticize Russian society for its declining morals, his portrayal of the woman can be seen to invoke sympathy for her cause, while also suggesting Kramskoi’s own judgment and perhaps even fear of this new sexual woman. I will also discuss his modes of depicting respectable bourgeois Russian women in opposition to his more decadent and sensual

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5 In terms of scholarship written concerning the “fallen” woman, there is a long established precedence for thinking about this topic in conjunction with Western European art. And while similar discussion has been extended to the motif of the fallen woman in the Russian literature of the period, this conversation has not been applied to the art with remotely the same frequency. Several feminist historians have taken on the plight of the fallen women of nineteenth-century Russian women. This is treated sparsely, however, in the field of English-speaking art history. See Rosalind P. Gray, *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); and David Jackson, *The Wanderers and critical realism in nineteenth-century Russian Painting* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).

European Unknown Woman. Finally, I will look to the realm of fashion in society to understand the way that both a woman’s and man’s sartorial choices could serve as an indicator of ideological persuasion and a declaration of national identity, as well as how wardrobe and self-fashioning became a construct of power in the world of prostitution.

The Peredvizhniki at Home and Abroad

In 1871, a group of St Petersburg artists under the leadership of Ivan Kramskoi joined with Vasily Perov and several other prominent artists from Moscow to form the Society for Travelling Art Exhibitions, or The Wanderers (peredvizhniki). The formation of the peredvizhniki breathed new life into Russian art by moving away from the passé neo-classical style and subject matter still enforced by the Academy. In 1863, a series of misunderstandings and disagreements erupted between certain students and directors at the Academy. Each group had conflicting ideas concerning what constituted appropriate subject for this year’s gold medal competition. As a result, Kramskoi and thirteen other students left the Academy during without competing in the competition, thus failing to meet the necessary requirements needed to graduate. Free from the restraint of Tsarist appointed officials, these artists sought to explore pertinent national themes. They emphasized the Russian experience through portraying important historical events, significant members of society in portraiture, contemporary issues through Realism, and the vastness and wealth of their nation through landscape.

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7 In 1863, Kramskoi with a number of his fellow students neared graduation by preparing for the final gold medal competition. However, this year it was determined that only one gold medal Grand Prix prize would be allotted, and the students would not be allowed to resubmit to gold medal competitions in subsequent years. After a series of disagreements between several students and the administration concerning the medal prize and the subject matter for their competition, a scene of Odin in Valhalla from Norse mythology was selected as the subject for the competition. Disgruntled, fourteen students led by Ivan Kramskoi left the Academy in protest. See Evgeny Steiner, “Pursuing Independence: Kramskoi and the Peredvizhniki vs. The Academy of Arts,” The Russian Review 870 (April 2011): 256.

8 For critical publications concerning the Wanderers, see Elizabeth K. Valkenier, Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1990); D.V. Sarabianov, Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant-Garde (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Yelena Nesterova, The Itinerants the
Ivan Kramskoi, like many of his contemporaries, had migrated to St Petersburg from a small provincial town in order to study at the Imperial Academy of Arts. Coming from provincial areas to metropolitan spaces, these artists gained exposure to two very distinct sides of Russia, the urban and the rural. And although the artists of this group, including Ivan Kramskoi, entered into social circles of the intelligentsia and upper class bourgeoisie in St Petersburg and Moscow, their sense of Russian identity was largely derived from rural Russian life rather than European culture.

One of the chief concerns of the peredvizhniki, therefore, was to not only exhibit in St Petersburg and Moscow, but also to send their art on tour to provincial towns and to offer cultural exposure to members of the peasant class who otherwise did not have access to high art. They also helped to establish art programs and museums in rural schools with financial aid from local government and liberal nobility. One peasant commenting on the Wanderer’s travelling exhibition stated, “When the exhibitions came, the sleepy country towns were diverted for a short while from their games of cards, their gossip and their boredom, and they breathed in the fresh current of free art. Debates and arguments arose on subjects about which the townsfolk had never thought before.”

This element of the peredvizhniki illustrates a major transition in the Russian art world.

These differences in class and identity became especially important when, in conjunction with the rising spirit of nationalism, artists like Ivan Kramskoi promoted the creation of an

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9 Kramskoi was born in 1837 in Ostrogozhk, a few hundred miles to the south of Moscow.

10 Orlando Figes, Natasha’s Dance (New York: Picador, 2002), 198.
authentically Russian art. The *peredvizhniki* began to establish not only an art that was showcased to the lower classes, but an art that elevated the commonality of everyday life for the overwhelming majority of Russia’s population. Scenes of provincial religious practices such as those in Vasily Perov’s *Easter Procession in a Village* (1861) (fig. 2) and Konstantin Savitsky’s *Greeting the Icon* (1878) (fig. 3) or even an engagement in politics among the peasant class as seen in Gregory Myasoedov’s *The Zemstvo Dines* (1872) (fig. 4) represent only a small fraction of the enormous outpouring of images in this period that explore genre scenes of peasant life.

As an artist, Kramskoi subsisted on portrait commissions. Regardless, he, like his fellow *peredvizhniki*, also favored marginal subject matter. His portraits of individual members of the peasant class such as *Mina Moiseev* (1882) (fig. 5), *Head of an Old Peasant* (1874) (fig. 6) and *Forester* (1874) (fig. 7) elevated his sitters from obscurity to the canvas, a position of prominence generally reserved for lofty figures or ideals. In reviewing his official portrait commissions alongside his images of peasants, we gain two important insights. The first is that in treating marginalized members of society, Kramskoi would capture the condition of their inner psychology and emotion through the expression of their faces (figs. 5-7). The second is that he imbued his subjects with a masterful and intriguing gaze. Kramskoi was perhaps unequaled amongst his contemporaries for his ability to engage the viewer through the gaze of his sitter. A few examples of this are found in his *Forester*, his own *Self Portrait* (1867) (fig. 10), and his famous *Portrait of Leo Tolstoy* (1873) (fig. 8). The mastery of the latter becomes especially acute when contrasted with other depictions of the great author, such as Nikolai Ge’s *Portrait of L.N. Tolstoy* (1884) (fig. 9). Whereas Ge’s rendering shows Tolstoy as genius, furiously scrawling lines on the page, Kramskoi shows Tolstoy looking out beyond the viewer, almost refusing to

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make eye contact due to some deep inner contemplation. Even so, the viewer is still arrested and drawn in by his gaze, as if forced to consider the depth and superiority of Tolstoy’s mind.

Although Kramskoi made two trips abroad in his life, the first in 1869 to Germany and France and the second in 1876 to Italy and France, he remained a leading proponent for national Russian art. An important and well-known exchange that demonstrates his ideas concerning national opposed to foreign art and aesthetics comes from his correspondence with his pupil and friend, Ilya Repin, who studied abroad in Paris on a pension provided by the Academy.

While abroad, Repin began to not only to experiment with Western styles, but to also consider Western aesthetic philosophies. During his Parisian sojourn, Repin began to choose subject matter free from the constraints of didacticism, embracing to an extent what he saw as the French attitude toward art, looking to paint “costume, color [and] light,” as opposed to an “inner content of the subject.” Evidence of this transition can be seen in works such as his painterly landscape study The Road from Montmartre in Paris (1876) (fig. 12). And despite regulation against exhibiting independently, Repin submitted his A Parisian Café (1875) (fig. 11) to the Paris salon of 1875. Repin’s evolving theories contrasted sharply from the prevailing views of his mentor Ivan Kramskoi, his Academic sponsors, as well as major art critic and peredvizhnik proponent Vladimir Stasov. Stasov preached that Russian art needed to come into its own and become a national art. In order to do so, he argued, it needed to free itself from the tenets of Western art. Kramskoi advocated for didacticism in art nearly to the point of obsession. Kramskoi firmly maintained that the artist had a moral obligation to society and that the role of

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art was not solely to portray beauty or demonstrate verisimilitude, but rather to convey messages that would benefit mankind. Many of his philosophical views regarding art were recorded in his correspondences with Stasov. In one such letter, Kramskoi stated that an artist should be “one of the most educated and advanced of his time” and as one of the “best representatives of society” have a familiarity with and opinion concerning all pertinent issues facing society.

Kramskoi’s reactions to Repin’s *Parisian Café* are instructive in demonstrating his pro-Russian philosophies and encourage greater understanding of some his own subjectivities that undergird the creation of *Unknown Woman*. In *Parisian Café*, Repin portrays a busy nighttime *café*, bathed in the yellow glow of electric light spilling out onto the boulevard. The scene contains vignettes of social interaction and includes portraits of several contemporary French figures. The main action circulates around a seated woman in black facing the boulevard, who is modeled after Anna Judic (fig. 13). Judic, a prominent actress in the Parisian operettas, led an amorous lifestyle and her haughty soliciting nature is shown attracting the attention of the men and the scandalized glances of the women around her.

Kramskoi’s ensuing correspondence with Repin offers essential context for understanding *Unknown Woman*. Although Kramskoi (still in Russia) knew about the concept of

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17 The painting’s current state is one of restoration, representing the canvas as Ilya Repin left it in 1876. In 1916, he revisited his canvas, making minor changes, but completely reconfiguring the figure of Anna Judic. As Igor Grabar states, the original image of Judic contains a “typical Parisian coquette” who was “defiant” with a “summoning look,” “knowing her value, beautiful, with languid painted eyes, noticeably made up.” In the place of this haughty Parisian Repin placed a young provincial girl, “shy, timid, downtrodden, a bashful Sonya Marmelodova repentant of her life.” Игорь Грабарь, *Репин монография в двух томах* том I (Москва: Академии наук СССР, 1963), 150. David Jackson contributes that in 1936 the painting was restored to its pre-1916 state. Although Repin did not comment on the motivation for these changes, Jackson attributes this to commercial purposes. But as he asserts, the composition is much more convincing and effective if the women is more brazen, warranting the attention of those seated around her. Jackson, “Repin in Paris, 1873-1876,” 398.
Repin’s painting, he did not fully comprehend its implications until another Russian painter returned from Paris and explained the composition as well as its poor reception in the Salon.\(^{18}\) In his next letter, Kramskoi lightly chided Repin for painting a work that forsook a national tone for a more international and cosmopolitan theme. He writes:

> A person in whom Ukrainian blood flows is even more capable (because he understands it without effort) to portray a heavy, strong, and almost savage organism, and not just some coquette. I’m not saying that it is not a subject, for oh what a subject! Just not for us: one needs to listen to chanson singers from the cradle, one needs still a few generations before our appearance in the world to have trained in copying various pieces, in a word, you need to be French.\(^{19}\)

His rebuke of Repin’s work was not that he had painted a coquette, but that he was striving to depict a scene outside of his national frame of reference. The potential in the subject matter, however, seemed to Kramskoi to be indisputable.\(^{20}\)

The Russian scholar to conduct the most informative and insightful scholarship on Ivan Kramskoi, Sofia Goldstein, suggests that Repin’s *Parisian Café* was likely the source of inspiration for Kramskoi’s *Unknown Woman*. But while *Parisian Café* deals with foreign culture, *Unknown Woman* explores the conditions surrounding a fallen woman within a nationalistic framework, and is embedded with elements that demonstrate conflicts of modernity and nationalism à la russe. The strongest connection between the two is indeed the way each explores questions concerning the moral character of a person and the moral decline of modern society.\(^{21}\) While Goldstein affirms the connection between these two works, she does not extend her discussion to demonstrate just how *Unknown Woman* indicated this moral decline, but merely states that the expression of the model in *Unknown Woman* reflects sincere inner turmoil.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 399.
\(^{20}\) Гольдштейн, *Крамской*, 223.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
and rejects the false morality of bourgeois society. Indeed, the majority of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century scholarship and criticism has likewise failed to discuss the pertinence of Unknown Woman as a commentary on modern Russian society. The cause for this could stem from many reasons, one of which could be the difficulty in decoding the ambiguities that Kramskoi painted into his work. It is difficult to distinguish whether the woman is virtuous or venal. Her class is masked by her wardrobe. Her identity, despite a great deal of conjecture, still remains unknown, and even the genre of the painting is difficult to distinguish, falling somewhere between portraiture and genre scene, the expository nature of 1860s Russian Realism and the moral concerns of Naturalism. In order to more fully arrive at the richness of this painting and the insights it provides into the Russian society of its time, I will first navigate through the reception of the work beginning with her initial exhibition.

Unknown Woman and Her Critics

In reviewing the critiques written concerning Unknown Woman and the eleventh peredvizhnik exhibition, several prominent responses begin to emerge. Of the seventeen newspaper articles that I have accessed written on the exhibition throughout 1883, most remark that Kramskoi’s portraits and Repin’s paintings garnered the most attention. While mentioning Kramskoi’s other works and often praising the portrait of a Madame Vogau, six fail to mention Unknown Woman entirely, four of those six significantly being written in St Petersburg. Of the remaining nine, six concentrate their remarks on the formal elements of Kramskoi’s painting, while only offering a brief discussion of the represented woman. Two different writers simply mention the photographic quality of the painting, expressing awe at Kramskoi’s technical ability

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22 Гольдштейн, Крамской, 223.
23 He exhibited at least two other portraits along with Unknown Woman—Mina Moiseev mentioned above, as well as of a figure named Madame Vogau, the whereabouts of which are unknown.
One commentator mentions, “The woman sitting in the carriage attracts a lot of attention to herself.” He continues, “the blue velvet, pale feather, [and] dazzling beauty of the character strikes the viewer, but in peering into that beautiful face, you feel a coldness emanating out toward you. *Unknown Woman* gazes fixedly at the viewer, but gazes coldly arrogantly … Kramskoi … composed a special palette in which truly a cool blue tone dictates the figure and the face.”

Another mentions that Kramskoi’s *Unknown Woman* attracted more than just a little public attention, and describes the woman as a “beautiful madame with dark passionate eyes and sensual red lips, wearing matching blue velvet coat and cap, lounging in a carriage.”

One journalist favorably wrote that in these latest works, Kramskoi had imbued his figures with a certain truthful grace that increased the quality of his paintings one hundred percent. He declares that many saw it not as a portrait but a tendentious painting, one in which the artist wanted to expose the “not entirely pure side” of youthful beauty. He maintains, however, that it is a portrait full of exquisite beauty. This remark reveals that some viewers saw the painting as controversial, dealing with impurity, but he but stops short of expounding on the polemics of the painting in order to reaffirm his interest in its aesthetics. A review in a French periodical mentions “number 79” briefly as a portrait of a charming coquette. These last two critiques are particularly suspect as there is not much charm to be found in the haughty gaze of the woman, and because certainly a pretty picture of youthful beauty is a more palatable concept than an image of a beautiful courtesan being acquired from the Nevsky Prospekt.

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24 З.О. “Одиннадцатая передвижная выставка”, Новороссийский телеграф, 22 октября 1883, № 2608 and Киевлянин, 26 ноября 1883, № 255.
25 В. Си-въ [В.И. Сизов], “Одиннадцатая передвижная выставка картин,” Московский листок, 10 мая 1883, № 127.
26 Шкл-ский, “XI передвижная выставка в Елисаветграде,” Одесский вестник, 13 Октября 1883, № 225.
27 А.З. Лед, “Искусства и Критик,” Санкт Петербургские ведомости, 11 September, 1883, № 244.
The first thread of consensus that one discerns, therefore, is an admiration for Kramskoi’s abilities, as well as intrigue with the beauty and composition of the woman within the painting. Although there seems to be some subtext or hint of controversy surrounding the woman, it seems that some of the journalists writing about Unknown Woman genuinely did not detect any ulterior meanings embedded in Kramskoi’s work, which is possible especially for those who encountered the exhibition abroad in cities like Odessa, Kiev, and Warsaw, who weren’t familiar with the context of Russian metropolitan life.

The second major thread of commentary that arises from the exhibition’s reviews is the implication of sexual deviancy or prostitution in Unknown Woman. This understanding comes from three articles specifically, written by journalists in St Petersburg and Moscow. Critically for the meaning of this painting as a reflection of the modern woman, none of them seem absolutely certain of the sexual status of the woman in the carriage. However, their comments indicate that they did clearly discern the ambiguity surrounding the woman. So candid are their discussions that I believe that one potential reason why the other writers in St Petersburg and Moscow either failed to discuss the work (acclaimed as one of the major attractions of the exhibition), or confined their commentary to a discussion of aesthetics was due to discomfort with engaging with the social conditions highlighted in the work.

In his critique of Unknown Woman, P. Boborikin boldly and concisely articulates the reason for the intrigue surrounding the woman and her place in Russian society:

The woman with the dark majestic beauty somewhat reminiscent of a gypsy, sits in the carriage at the time of promenade along the Nevsky, from three to five o’clock, in a velvet and fur dress. She attracts no less public attention than [another of Kramskoi’s portrait in the exhibition]. But she is not designed for a lewd or obscene effect. It is unknown who this woman is, respectable or venal, but in her sits an entire epoch. She is painted with such richness, and elegance, with a wealth of beautiful realism even down to the materials and fur.29

29 В Боборыкин, П. “Крамской и Репин,” Новости и Биржевая Газета, 24 Марта 1883.
Boborikin makes clear the sexual ambiguities surrounding the woman. The reference to her seemingly Romany features seems to heighten her sexual connotation by linking her with an exotic race.30 This allusion to a gypsy provides potential insight into Boborikin’s and even Kramskoi’s psyche. Referring to her as a gypsy seems to carry connotations to a sort of ‘exotic other,’ making her both sexually alluring, but also fearsome. But if she is confined to prostitution, she becomes more innocuous because her body can be subjected to will of the male client. The other essential idea contained in this comment is that “in her sits an entire epoch.” Boborikin asserts that her presence isn’t meant to be lewd, but rather demonstrate the state of the St Petersburg promenade, where wealthy beautiful women (either respectable or venal) could be seen in elegant, sumptuous materials and fur. The role of wardrobe and the position of women in society will be discussed in greater depth later.

The next article, likewise written in St Petersburg, refers to the figure in Unknown Woman as a contemporary Aspasia, “rushing along the Nevsky, gazing at the world with contempt from the height and grandeur of her carriage.”31 The author conveys Kramskoi’s impressive treatment of details, her chic toilette designed for effect, and comments specifically on her expression calling the scorn “reflected in the face of Aspasia … bait for a naïve young heart.”32 By invoking Aspasia, who was believed to have been an Athenian courtesan and mistress to Pericles, this writer alludes more specifically to her sexuality, fashioning her into a

31 П.Н Полевой, “Маленький художник одиннадцатая передвижная выставка,” Живописное Обозрение, 12, 19, и 26 марта № 11, 12, 13.
32 Ibid.
modern courtesan based on a classical motif. But timeless is the way her wealth and grandeur are paraded through the streets like bate to ensnare young naïve victims.

The third article, written in Moscow, takes a more indignant tone:

Exquisite technique, an incredibly painted face, wonderfully conveyed velvet and fur, free, relaxed pose—all of this does not redeem the shortcomings of the painting. If it is a portrait, then it is not permitted to congratulate this woman that he has painted because almost everyone standing before this painting has accepted this portrayed character as a Camellia... Judging by the setting, the worn out carriage, the compulsory isolation and soliciting gaze, as well as by the title of the painting Unknown Woman, the public likely does not err in thinking they have been given a portrait of an expensive Camellia. The artist, upon whom has fallen the responsibility to leave our descendants living portraits of the prominent figures of our time out of decency would probably not exhibit a portrait of a Camellia, therefore one should consider Unknown Woman as a painting. And if this is so, then is it not permitted to show Kramskoi the least bit of acclaim... Could the artist really only find fair posture, an elegant face and an evocative, noble gaze in the life of a Camellia? We...know what constitutes the life of a Camellia... We know that behind a beautiful exterior they acknowledge a lurking mountain of dirt and filth, and that they pay for a moment of outward success by countless offenses... What is Kramskoi doing in his painting? In the carriage sits a wonderful young woman. Let there be near her some other kind of young woman, one of those playing children that love to go on rides and you would probably recognize this cocotte for a decent woman.

Amidst these rebukes, this writer gives us tremendous insight into the reception of Unknown Woman. One major point, which calls the commentaries into question that only focus on the painting’s formal qualities (and subsequently all scholarship conducted since that follow in the same vein), is the statement that all of the public coming in contact with this work understood her as a prostitute. This writer who saw the exhibition in Moscow, away from the contexts of the capital, certainly read her as a Camellia. For this reason I submit that critics who failed to discuss Unknown Woman, or extend that discussion beyond its formal features were made uncomfortable by this work’s associations with potentially deviant female sexuality. If those in Moscow read

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While not able to trace the direct etymology for the term “Camellia” in nineteenth century Russia, this likely derives from Alexandre Dumas’ The Lady of the Camellias, 1852. This play was then set to music by Verdi and became La Traviata, first performed in 1853. These works popularized the term Camellia as a reference to a courtesan.

Ф.-в М, “На передвижной выставке картин,” Русские Ведомости, 29 мая 1883 № 145.
her to be a prostitute, how much more clearly then, did the critics in St Petersburg who understood the associations of Nevsky Prospekt, who encountered such scenes of the promenade, and who knew what was publicly acceptable, would these critics understand these implications?

The continual use of the label ‘Camellia’ is also crucial in this context. As we gained from Boborikin’s comments, the woman could be interpreted in a manner that highlighted her sexuality, but underscoring this emphasis could also be a fear of the femme fatale. As this writer continually stresses that this woman is a Camellia, one whose life is comprised of “a mountain of dirt and filth,” he is seeking to negate the sexual power that she as a beautiful courtesan might be able to wield over a man. While the interpretations of the emotions seen in the face of the woman are conflicted, it is plausible to suggest that Kramskoi painted this woman as brazen and almost predatory. In this light, the misogyny of the era, as well as Kramskoi’s own subjectivities are exposed, as he creates a woman that seems both alluring and dangerous, powerful, and consequently needing to be constrained.

The other salient point made (perhaps inadvertently) in this critique is that the woman could have changed cocotte to decent with the inclusion of another woman or child. By so doing he could have eliminated ambiguity about the woman’s social status. As an insight to modernity, this ambiguity is the crux of the entire work. As this writer demonstrates, the line between discerning a respectable woman from a fallen one is so thin that the balance could be tipped by the inclusion of just one other figure.

In moving from public exhibition reviews to private correspondence, two statements given by Kramskoi’s contemporaries and leading art critics of the day, Vladimir Stasov and Pavel Kovalevsky, further demonstrate the opposing poles of the spectrum of critical reception regarding Unknown Woman. In a letter to Pavel Tretyakov, Stasov lists several of Kramskoi’s
works in the eleventh peredvizhnikи exhibition and quickly dismisses Unknown Woman as a “coquette in a carriage.”

Referring to Kramskoi’s “latest works” in general (the letter was written just weeks after the opening of the eleventh exhibition), he states they were more like vain attempts than paintings. He exclaims “in these new works there is no body, only paint, searching and only to a certain extent achieving. How I long for the former Kramskoi! In my opinion, he is now on a slippery path.”

Tretyakov was a wealthy textile owner and was a major patron of the peredvizhnikи and of Kramskoi. Tretyakov concurred with Stasov’s assessment, responding, “I also like Kramskoi’s earlier works better than these last ones.”

Although Tretyakov frequently funded Kramskoi, he did not purchase the piece, and it did not enter the Tretyakov Gallery’s collection until 1925. Given the amount of praise Kramskoi garnered for his technical treatment of Unknown Woman, we can gather that the majority of viewers at least thought the work was painted well. In light of the other St Petersburg critics who were aware of social implications in the painting, I believe that one way to understand Stasov’s and Tretyakov’s dismissive comments is that they thinly mask what was likely disapproval with Kramskoi’s subject matter, as well as potential unease in being faced with the reality of the growing practice of prostitution in major Russian cities. Their failure to mention specifically what it was about Kramskoi’s latest works that they found lacking, especially when other critics praised him for his abilities, gives at least plausibility to this conclusion.

36 Ibid.
37 Kramskoi’s oeuvre was comprised of a series of portraiture of members of the Russian intelligentsia commissioned by Tretyakov in order to create a kind of visual record of the age’s greatest luminaries. Two of these portraits include his image work of Tolstoy and a commemorative painting do of Nikolay Nekrasov in his waning moments of life in Nikolay Nekrasov in the Period of his “Last Songs” (1877) (fig. 14).
38 Гольдштейн, Крамской, 225.
At the other end of this spectrum, Pavel Kovalevsky candidly articulated what he saw as Kramskoi’s aims with the painting in an article written after the posthumous retrospective of Kramskoi exhibited in 1887. Kovalevsky, a well-established psychiatrist, historian, critic, and close contemporary of Kramskoi’s famously wrote concerning *Unknown Woman*:

Kramskoi’s portraits are considered by many to be accusatory. However, it is not the artist that denounces [society], but rather society that condemns itself under the veracity of his brush…. [This] provocatively beautiful woman casts upon you a contemptuous glance from a luxurious carriage, dressed in expensive furs and velvet—is this not one of the spawn of big cities that release contemptible women onto the street dressed in outfits, purchased for the price of female chastity? And if they allow themselves to look on society with contempt, then it is society itself which is guilty. 40

Far from shying away from the painting’s societal implications, Kovalevsky directly addresses its connection to the institution of prostitution and its degradation of female chastity. He also includes his perspective on Kramskoi’s motivation—that Kramskoi does not paint this image to denounce or condemn the woman herself, but instead to allude to the practice of commercial sex in this age of modernization, thereby implicating and castigating Russian society for its patronage or condonation of this practice.

The complexity of this image is that it defies absolutes in interpretation. Because Kramskoi never provided any sort of documented statement concerning this work, one cannot irrefutably state that Kramskoi was castigating society while finding sympathy for the prostitute. While the censure of modern Russian society seems to be one of Kramskoi’s motivations, Boborikin’s comments suggest an even latent sexuality found in the image that suggests both attraction for and apprehension of venal women. In addition, the haughty expression on her face and the way that she peers down from her carriage can been seen to also indicate a sense of judgment toward the woman. And while some saw nothing but a highly technical or beautiful

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40 Гольдштейн, Крамской, 220.
painting, others believed Kramskoi was featuring the world of a wealthy St Petersburg courtesan. However, these complexities, as well as the ambiguity of “is she or isn’t she?” experienced in Kramskoi’s day has been left out of contemporary discourse. Scholars who are far removed from late nineteenth-century Russian context, have for one reason or another failed to discuss the breadth of this painting’s reception, as well as its associations with fallen womanhood.

The general trend of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship has been decidedly celebratory, discussing the woman’s beauty, Kramskoi’s potential relationship with the sitter, or the identity of the model instead of its critical message and social context. As Griselda Pollock has stated, when one focuses on “woman as image, beautiful to look at,” emphasis on beauty deters exploring the motivations behind an image’s creation. One historian has even claimed that the woman is full of virtue, and in her there is not the slightest hint of vulgarity or bad taste. Even Goldstein stated that Kramskoi’s contemporaries who discerned the denunciatory aspects of the painting were probably aware of some event or action that motivated its creation, rather than finding accusatory aspects in the painting itself. Consequently, contemporary Russian audiences view Unknown Woman very positively, regarding her as a symbol of mystery, beauty, and intrigue. They also express belief that she represents a dazzling young woman from society, and indeed one can currently buy an Unknown Woman postage stamp, or assemble her puzzle purchased in the gift shop of the Tretyakov Gallery, (figs. 15-16). One biographer who does speak briefly of her as a social pariah states that she is rejected by society and peers out at

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41 Pollock, Differencing the Canon, 121-122.
42 Игорь Долгополов, Мастера и Шедевры в 3-х томах II Том (Москва: Изобразительное искусство 1987), 310. Dolgopolov jeopardizes his own credibility, however, by incorrectly attributing a quote from Tretyakov concerning another portrait by Kramskoi about which he said “in her there is much beauty” to Unknown Woman. He goes on to further lose esteem by indignantly discussing the way the critics unjustifiably slandered Manet’s glamorous model Victorine Meurent of Olympia and stained Renoir’s sweet and lovely Jeanne Samary with verbal mud. 310.
43 Гольдштейн, Крамской, 223.
her audience with contempt. But he then groundlessly postulates that just as *Unknown Woman* lacks a name, she lacks an essence or identity. Hence, this was not actually a portrait, but a generalized image, and any attempts to discover whether this woman was of high society or the demi-monde would be fruitless.\(^{44}\)

In contrast to these points, I maintain that while the woman’s identity remains unknown, an exploration of the associations between *Unknown Woman* and fallen womanhood, as well as a in depth investigation of the elements such as setting, gaze, and wardrobe in this image lead to an incredibly fruitful understanding of Russian society and modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. In order to more fully contextualize the range of reviews in *Unknown Woman*’s original reception, as well as to better understand how this painting indicates Russian society in relation to modernity, it will next be instructive to examination the practice of prostitution in post-emancipation Russia.

**Prostitution in Russia**

While Russian culture and society has historically had an oscillating relationship with the West, one Russian institution whose growth and development closely mirrored that of Europe was the practice of prostitution. In a time of swelling nationalism where artistic productions were to discover and promote “Russianness,” foreign influences were at times viewed as suspect, and social problems could be designated as “Western.” In Russia, just as in other European cities, prostitution grew in direct relation to increasing industrialization and urbanization, but Russians associated these aspects of modern life, including the spread of venereal disease, with the degrading influence of the West. Some felt that Russia had remained free from this corruption until the seventeenth century when Peter the Great began ushering in Western technological

\(^{44}\) Надольская, Крамской, 50-51.
developments. In the debates between the Westerners and the Slavophiles, this issue came to be “another lens through which to view ‘Westernization’.”

Concurrent with the emancipation of Russia’s serfs in 1861, the empire became more interconnected between major cities and the provinces through the expansion of the railroad. As industrialization increased, so did the need for workers. Peasants were facing a growing need for cash to be able to obtain certain goods such as kerosene, nails, tea, and sugar, and thus thousands of peasants were drawn to the factories of the city. Many women also came to the city naively seeking out better circumstances and would take jobs there as seamstresses, service personnel, and servants. The emancipation of the serfs caused an influx of migrants into major Russian cities in order to earn money to survive, but due to issues of inequality, many women could not earn sufficient wages on which to subsist, causing them to seek out other means of income. The overwhelming majority of women who turned to prostitution did so due to insurmountable inequalities or exploitative circumstances built into the emerging capitalist and industrial systems.

In order to understand the pertinence of the woman’s demeanor portrayed in *Unknown Woman*, it is important to realize the way that throughout the nineteenth century the institution of prostitution developed as an apparatus of state patriarchy. Although peasant women who came to the major cities of the empire from the provinces faced just as difficult working and living conditions, the women at the heart of the narrative were forced into a situation where their economic survival was dependent upon the state.

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46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
conditions in the city as they did in the village, they enjoyed a new kind of independence from patriarchal control.\textsuperscript{51} One historian states, “The growth of prostitution was the most visible and troubling symbol of women’s freedom from patriarchal control and it moved the state to action.”\textsuperscript{52} In 1843, the minister of internal affairs under Emperor Nicholas I instigated a system of regulation under the auspices of the police and medical community by which all prostitutes were to be registered with the police and issued an official document, otherwise known as the “yellow ticket” (for examples of the documentation issued to registered prostitutes, see figs. 17-18).\textsuperscript{53} Through regulation, the state could monitor women who had moved out from under the patriarchal order of their village or home, thereby re-establishing a different form of patriarchal control.\textsuperscript{54} The ticket identified their trade and embarrassingly had to be presented by the women in all circumstances where official documentation was required.\textsuperscript{55}

Interestingly, in this system, class and social status could facilitate exemption from registration. While the lower class women of cities were targeted, well-educated or financially secure prostitutes were allowed to maintain their passports and receive private medical treatment and examination when necessary.\textsuperscript{56} One scholar refers to these women as an “elite group” of prostitutes (or courtesans), women who came from or associated with the upper strata of society.

\textsuperscript{51} Engel, “Transformation versus Tradition,” 142.
\textsuperscript{54} Bernstein, \textit{Sonia’s Daughters}, 6.
\textsuperscript{56} Bernstein, \textit{Sonia’s Daughters}, 33.
Examples of these were tradeswomen, chorus girls, ballerinas, sales clerks and others who held regular jobs, were not destitute, and had permanent addresses.\textsuperscript{57} Aside from the injustice inherent in this structure, attempts at regulation were problematic from the program’s genesis, and abuse of police power and inspectors was widespread. Despite attempts at regulation and government control, unregistered prostitutes were far more common than registered ones.

One of the crucial aspects of \textit{Unknown Woman} against this backdrop of Russia modernity is its singularity. Although various surveys indicate that the number of registered prostitutes in major Russian cities was high (into the tens of thousands),\textsuperscript{58} making this an unpleasant but surely well-known and understood facet of society, \textit{Unknown Woman} is one of the few works of nineteenth-century Russian visual art to expose this practice. One of the only other works where this social problem was treated is Vasily Perov’s \textit{Drowned Woman} (1867) (fig. 19).\textsuperscript{59} In accordance with several of his works of realism painted in the 1860s centered on social commentary, Perov’s work features a married working-class girl who has been pulled from the river by a police officer. The inclusion of a wedding ring on her right finger complicates an understanding of the exact cause for the woman’s implied suicide. Despite this, the angle of the woman’s body on the bank echoes the line of the Moscow skyline in the background, signifying a visual link between her tragic death and the oppressive and ghastly city looming in thick fog.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 53.

\textsuperscript{58} Exact statistics are difficult if not impossible to list. Police enforced registration was often arbitrary and hardly accurate, and while prostitutes belonging to brothels could be more or less effectively accounted for, scores of prostitutes acted alone clandestinely. Even estimates vary widely, but one source cites that in the late 1860s, both Moscow and St Petersburg had 2000 registered prostitutes. By WWI the number had grown to 3000. But for these 3000 registered, speculation lists a number from between 30,000 to 50,000 unregistered ones, a ratio comparable to the cities of London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. Stites, “Prostitute and Society,” 350-351.

\textsuperscript{59} I have only encountered two other paintings from this period dealing with prostitution. The first, \textit{Nevsky Prospekt at Night} by Yaroshenko is reported to have been destroyed during WWII and I have not been able to find a verified image or replication. The second is a watercolor entitled \textit{On the Nevsky Prospekt at Night} (1874) in which two women eagerly engage in conversation with a solitary man along the boulevard. The work is attributed to Vasily Surikov, but I have been unable to verify its legitimacy through reliable sources.
Given the conditions that women were facing in these modern cities, it is not hard to imagine that this woman would have brought herself to such an end.\textsuperscript{60}

While representations of woman’s sexuality were rare in the Russian visual art of this period, such representations were treated fairly frequently in literature. Two well-known works from this period that deal with female sexuality were Fyodor Dostoevsky’s \textit{Crime and Punishment} published in 1866, and Leo Tolstoy’s \textit{Anna Karenina} published in 1878. While Anna is an adulteress from the highest echelons of St Petersburg society, Sonia is a prostitute dependent on her earnings from life on the yellow ticket for the survival of herself and her family. Both works, just like Kramskoi’s \textit{Unknown Woman}, address the moral implications of and challenge the idea of fallen womanhood in late nineteenth-century Russian society.

In his original conception of the novel \textit{Anna Karenina}, Tolstoy wanted to create a story about an adulteress who was meant to be pitiful rather than guilty.\textsuperscript{61} Although Anna developed differently than was initially projected, the message of empathy or at least serious contemplation of her situation rather than outright judgment and condemnation remained the principal message of the novel. This sentiment is reflected in the opening epigraph of the novel “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.”

The complexity of the novel and our attitude toward Anna develops as we learn of the hypocrisies that encompass Russian society. Although Anna, the high-class socialite of St Petersburg, enters into an affair with Vronsky, the liaison is not a result of her degeneracy or

\textsuperscript{60} The motif of the drowned woman was a very common in the Western tradition at this time. See Linda Nochlin, “Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman,” \textit{The Art Bulletin}, Vol. 60, No. 1 (March, 1978). The model Perov used to complete his painting was an actual drowned woman and former prostitute at the morgue that Perov had known during her time as a model at the Academy in years previous. Rosalind P. Gray, \textit{Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century}, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000): 173.

raging sexual appetite. And when she and Vronsky do consummate their relationship, she does not meet it boldly or triumphantly. Rather, Anna is described as a “body that [Vronsky] has deprived of life.” She sobs and begs for forgiveness from God, mired in shame. So while we view Anna as an adulteress, and despite the fact that society labels her as “fallen,” we see that throughout the novel she still retains her integrity and virtue.

Conversely, two truly “fallen” characters, fallen in the sense that they engage in multiple extramarital affairs without restraint or reservation, are Stiva Oblonsky, Anna’s brother, and Princess Betsy, her close friend. Stiva’s affair with the French governess and its repercussions within the Oblonsky family introduces the reader to the novel. Stiva’s indiscretions, however, are overlooked by society because of his charming, jovial nature, and by his wife who often chooses to ignore Stiva’s infidelity rather than confront the truth of her dysfunctional marriage. Princess Betsy likewise participates in numerous liaisons and adulterous relationships. These two appear to have no conscience, and as a result they are devoid of guilt for their actions. Conversely, Anna suffers continually from the moment of her “fall” until her suicide, never developing a blasé attitude about her choices. Although she is not free from guilt, her character invites consideration rather than blatant condemnation.

While associations exist between Kramskoi’s protagonist in Unknown Woman and the character Anna Karenina, Anna is an adulteress, not a courtesan. Therefore, any references of prostitution made in Unknown Woman might be more appropriate if considered in conjunction with the plight of Sonia Marmelodova in Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment. Dostoevsky’s novel, based in the streets of St Petersburg, is a psychological investigation of the mind of

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63 While I have not discovered the origins of this association, Unknown Woman is used to illustrate the cover of both Barnes and Noble’s, as well as a major Russian publisher’s editions of Anna Karenina (figs. 20-21).
Raskolnikov, a wretched and troubled student fraught with poverty. Raskolnikov commits murder out of illusions of moral superiority and social justice. The novel investigates Raskolnikov’s mental turmoil as he interacts with his family and acquaintances, trying to cope with the reality of his lowly state in the world as well as his guilt (or lack thereof) over his treacherous deeds. In the process, he becomes acquainted with Sonya Marmeladova. Sonya, the daughter of the drunk Semyon Marmeladov, is sixteen at the time that her father and stepmother, Katerina Ivanovna, and Katerina’s three children reach the brink of destitution and starvation. In a fit of anxiety one night, Katerina confronts Sonya for not contributing enough to the family, as her work as a tailor hardly brought in fifteen kopecks a day. From the subtext we gather that a madame has visited the landlord seeking to enlist Sonya’s services and Katerina issues the cruel challenge, “And what, what’s there to save? Some treasure!” Unprotestingly, Sonya quietly puts on her kerchief and scarf and withdraws into the night. She returns three hours later, bearing thirty rubles, the price of compensation for her chastity.

In one of the apex passages in the novel, Raskolnikov meets with Sonya after learning of her tale of woe from Marmeladov. Raskolnikov is seeking validation or perhaps vindication from his sins by confronting a figure who he feels is also steeped in vice. He sneeringly draws attention to her acts of prostitution, to her walking the streets and as to whether she is engaged in her employment on a daily basis. As he begins to rant against her, calling her a sinner living in filth, he concludes that it would be more reasonable for her to end her wretchedness by jumping in a river. Her lack of revolt surprises him, and he understands that she has already considered this option, but had not gone through with it because she knew what would become of Katerina

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Ivanovna’s children without her support. The understanding then flashes through Raskolnikov’s mind, “All this shame obviously touched her only mechanically; no true depravity, not even a drop of it, had yet penetrated her heart.”66 Although Sonya is engaged in prostitution and is deeply conflicted over it, she retains a “purity of spirit,”67 as well as her belief in God and maintains hope for her salvation. Yet again, we are presented with a character that society would view as “fallen,” but as the reader, we see that although she has lost her chastity, she still maintains her virtue.

Despite the prevalence of prostitution, it was not a subject frequently dealt with in nineteenth-century Russian art. An understanding of the social conditions surrounding prostitution, however, cedes the plausibility that Kramskoi was well aware of and referring to this practice in the modern Russian city. Additionally, Anna Karenina and Crime and Punishment help substantiate a reading of a sympathetic as moral contemplation of the fallen woman in this period. And although Tolstoy and Kramskoi as products of their time may still have looked upon their protagonists with some judgment, they also simultaneously sought to invite sympathy and understanding for the plight of the fallen woman in the midst of the hypocrisies of their society. The invitation for consideration of Unknown Woman comes as the viewer is forced to confront the individuality, removing her from the confines of social periphery. In order to further understand the elements of this work that suggest a reading of the woman as a courtesan, I will examine the ways Kramskoi constructed images of the respectable or revered Russian women in his life in order to see the contrasting devices he employed to associate prostitution in Unknown Woman with the West.

66 Ibid., 323.
67 Ibid.
Black Dress White Dress

While the majority of Kramskoi scholarship centers around his particularly emotional or psychological paintings, such as his renowned Christ in the Wilderness (fig. 22), or the portrait commissions he fulfilled for Tretyakov, little has been written concerning the portraits he painted for his family and friends. To begin to understand Kramskoi’s fashioning of his protagonist as a courtesan aligned with the West, a woman in dark, three works of women in white will help form an understanding of Kramskoi’s treatment of respectable Russian women in painting: the portraits of his wife Sofia Kramskaya (1866), Vera Tretyakova (wife of Pavel Tretyakov) (1876), and most significantly his Woman with an Umbrella (1883).

Kramskoi’s penchant for painting family members and prominent women in his life was established from the outset of his career. Soon after their marriage, Kramskoi painted his first portrait of Sofia Nikolaevna (fig. 23). Sofia is placed in a somewhat Romantic landscape, seated upon a marble bench in a heavily-vegetated grove in the waning daylight hours. The parasol that rests idly against her lap suggests that she has been engaged in reading since a much earlier time of day when such a device was needed to protect against the heat. This absorption in reading, as well as the almost unnatural illumination of her white dress in the enclosing dusk, gives a sense of an intellectually engaged woman. The illumination of her attire seems to reflect the enlightenment of her mind, and the dark overgrown forested area in which she sits gives the feeling of a noble and striking woman. She is represented as spirited, yet still adhering to good taste and propriety as indicated by her comeliness and her modest dress.

In the ensuing years, organic landscapes became one of Kramskoi’s common backdrops for portraits of his friends and respected acquaintances. This is prominently demonstrated in the portrait he did for his close friend and leading Russian landscape painter Ivan Shishkin (1873).
(fig. 24). The placement of Shishkin in the tall grass and brush of nature is a highly fitting environment for a landscape painter whose contribution to establishing a Russian identity in art was to capture the expansive beauty of the countryside. In a slightly more peculiar composition for *Portrait of V.N. Tretyakova* (1876), Kramskoi also painted the fashionable and respected Vera Tretyakova, wife of Pavel Tretyakov, against a screen of trees near the Tretyakov cottage in Kuntsev (fig. 25). A curious sort of juxtaposition exists in this painting between nature—the trees, tall grass and dirt trail—and the spectacular woman in her fashionable dress, lace, umbrella, and shawl. Tretyakova would seem to appear more natural in an urban or public social setting. What one begins to discern is a refutation of the city in favor of the countryside, not only to complement his models, but also as a way of making a statement about what it means to be Russian. Until well after the emancipation of the serfs, to be Russian was to be a peasant living closely to the land in provinces and rural areas for the overwhelming majority of the Empire. In addition, a positive association with the countryside is portrayed frequently in Russian literature. In *Anna Karenina* for example, those who come to visit Konstantin Levin at his country home frequently comment on a correlation between nature and purity, as well as a sense of freshness and rejuvenation that is gained by spending time in the country.\(^{68}\) Furthermore, as the comparison is drawn between family life and successful relationships versus failed ones, the strength of Levin’s and Kitty’s marriage thrives as they reside in the country together, whereas Anna’s and Vronsky’s relationship anchored in urban spaces crumbles. Kramskoi himself, like many of his contemporaries, came to St Petersburg after receiving a rural upbringing, and life

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\(^{68}\) Nature, or even just the province, as a source of reinvigoration is a motif common in Russian literature of the nineteenth century, but is also inherent in the ideology of Stiva Oblonsky and Sergei Koznyshev in *Anna Karenina* as they part from busy city life to visit Levin at his country manor.
spent closer to nature, removed from the metropolitan spaces, would have to him constituted the Russian experience.

These portraits in turn set a critical stage for a reading of Kramskoi’s *Woman with an Umbrella* (1883) (fig. 26), completed just months after *Unknown Woman* and shown in the twelfth *peredvizhniki* exhibition. Commenting on shared elements between these two paintings, art historian David Jackson states that both images combine “anonymity with wealth and status.” According to Jackson, *Unknown Woman* shows a haughty aristocratic woman looking at the viewer with “nonchalant disdain” while *Woman with an Umbrella* shows a woman “dressed all in white… a self-assured image of a class elite.” While Jackson keenly forges a link between the two, I believe a greater significance for these works can be developed if read in conversation with each other.

Despite differing dimensions between *Woman with an Umbrella* and *Unknown Woman*, I submit that they can be read as pendant pieces in which they represent ideological binaries. *Woman with an Umbrella* shows a woman relaxing calmly in the tall grass amidst the wild flowers, once again utilizing nature to connote Russianness. The purity of nature, just as in these previous paintings, is reflected by the whiteness of her clean and simple dress, highlighted by the midday sun. Furthermore, the woman propped up on the grass gazes listlessly off to the side. She is not sexualized and does not elicit a voyeuristic gaze, nor is there even a space for the viewer to occupy. The intention of the portrait is to represent his model as radiating a sort of natural beauty, and not to invite any interaction between subject and viewer.

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The bright, simple, and natural *Woman with an Umbrella* contrasts with the twilight, metropolitan, and modern *Unknown Woman*. Two preparatory sketches indicate the way that *Unknown Woman* was conceived by Kramskoi. The first (fig. 27), a rudimentary sketch done in a small pocket sketchbook, employs an unsteady black line to denote the form of a woman, while much greater conceptual detail is given to the outlines of the buildings along the street. Goldstein compellingly posits that the rough sketchy outline of the woman contrasted against the clear architectural details of the street indicate that this sketch was done from nature, even from a scene that he witnessed on the street. While Kramskoi only captured the fleeting image of a woman, he was able to take more time to map out the lines of the architectural background, showing from the initial sketch the importance of framing the scene within an urban context.\textsuperscript{70}

To extend this analysis, we note that the architectural details in the background of the sketch do not correlate with those surrounding Anichkov Bridge in the final painting. Not only, therefore, was the setting of the streets important to the meaning of the painting, but Kramskoi’s determination of specific location indicates a calculated choice that would contribute to that meaning. The second preparatory work (fig. 28), an oil sketch, adapted the rough form and position of the woman, but added full detail to her visage against a blank background. The lack of architectural detail in this work emphasizes Kramskoi’s attention to determining the proper mood of the model’s face in order to reflect the desired emotional state behind her gaze. The most striking emphases are the care that Kramskoi gives in portraying the cloudy look over her eyes as well as the gleam of her bright red lips, adding overt seductive qualities to her features.

The elements from these preparatory works are combined in the final production where physical location and emotional characteristics of the model’s visage are combined with a

\textsuperscript{70} Гольдштейн, Крамской, 222.
detailed treatment of the woman’s outfit. The woman, centered now in the middle of the canvas, settles into one seat of a two person carriage that is stopped along the famous Nevsky Prospekt near the Anichkov bridge.\textsuperscript{71} In contrast to the use of the countryside, Kramskoi purposefully utilized the Nevsky in St Petersburg to invoke the social connotations associated with this main boulevard. In the controversy between the Slavophiles and the Westerners, St Petersburg not only represented Peter the Great and the creation of his new capital to be a window on the West, but also an “open doorway through which Europe entered Russia.”\textsuperscript{72} In this period of modernization and urbanization, the clandestine prostitute was able to thrive in major avenues of the city. The Ligovsky and Nevsky prospekts in St Petersburg, the Khreshatik in Kiev, and the waterfront in Odessa all became common sites for sexual commerce.\textsuperscript{73} And the venues of the modern city seemed to facilitate these liaisons—places like theaters, clubs, \textit{café—chantants}, restaurants, and hotels, all provided locations for arrangement and consummation of these transactions. As the main boulevard of St Petersburg, the Nevsky Prospekt was the center of city life and culture, shopping, promenading, the theater, and prostitution.\textsuperscript{74}

The associations with prostitution based on location are echoed in the sexualized way the woman is presented. The darkness of her clothes is deeply contrasted against the pink background, emphasizing the curves of her figure. And while fully clothed, her sexuality is emphasized by her flushed cheeks, heavily lidded eyes, bright sensuous lips, sultry gaze, and the sensual caress of the fur of her coat against her neck and cheeks. Kramskoi’s handling of the paint itself, along with choice in color palette, utilizing cool tones in the blues and velvety blacks against the soft pink sky create a very soft and sensual feeling. The figure’s reclined position in

\textsuperscript{71}Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{72} Figes, \textit{Natasha’s Dance}, 61.
\textsuperscript{73} Stites, “Prostitute and Society,” 354.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
the cart suggests that she has just settled into the carriage. She turns her head to look back at the client or viewer who is presumably preparing to occupy the vacant space next to her, which is emphasized when examining only the bench of the carriage (fig. 30).

Far from the matter-of-fact portrayal of Woman with an Umbrella that excludes both the viewer and any sort of voyeurism, the stage-like composition which presents the female’s body, the empty space in the carriage, and the figure’s piercing gaze in Unknown Woman all work together to fashion her as spectacle and to establish a compelling interaction with the viewer. As we will see, the woman was intended to be observed by two audiences. The first was the prospective male client not portrayed, but insinuated in the pictorial space. The second gaze would come from the intended audience of contemporary viewers, both men and women, viewing the work as a part of the peredvizhniki exhibit.

The presentation of spectacle paired with and insinuating gaze found in Unknown Woman are similar to the devices poignantly utilized by Manet to present his model, Victorine Meurent, to the viewer in his Olympia (1865) (fig. 29). Olympia is an updated theme of the classical nude, but refashioned to portray Manet’s contemporary Parisian society. Instead of taking the form of a goddess or muse, she is shown as a prostitute who acknowledges both her spectators, as well as her sexuality. Kramskoi’s choice of framing Unknown Woman placed both prospective client and intended audience at a vantage point standing on the street. The vacant space and the close cropping of the image almost force the viewer into the open carriage space next to the woman. Just as the bouquet of flowers in Manet’s Olympia signifies the unseen presence of a client, the open carriage seat alerts us to an area of the canvas that will shortly be filled (fig. 30). The contemporary audience in real space would thereby be conflated with the male client in pictorial space, and would consequently be implicated in the sexual transaction taking place. From the
street, one is forced to look up into the eyes of the seated woman and confront her gaze while her elevation gives her a position of physical, if not moral, superiority over both client and audience as she gazes down upon them.\textsuperscript{75}

The contemporary viewing audience, both male and female, would have fallen under the reciprocal gaze of the woman in her carriage (see fig. 31).\textsuperscript{76} Sharing yet another correlation to Manet’s \textit{Olympia}, \textit{Unknown Woman} is not presented as a spectacle for male pleasure, but rather as an expository spectacle of male indiscretion. The philandering heterosexual male for whom this work would be the most pertinent would be exposed in a public setting for his participation in private sexual misconduct.\textsuperscript{77} But even those viewers who had no \textit{personal} interaction with prostitution, were clustered together with those who had and were forced to look up into the woman’s eyes. All, therefore, were confronted and made to acknowledge her individuality and the way this woman registers a series of personal emotions concerning her situation. And whether or not contemporary viewers directly contributed to prostitution, they were made to recognize the decline of social morals in the decay of their modern society. This is perhaps what Kovalevsky had in mind when he stated “if they [fallen women] allow themselves to look on society with contempt, then it is society itself which is guilty.” Kramskoi’s adept handling of the gaze as developed through his experience as a portraitist once again plays an integral role in the

\textsuperscript{75} Just as in the case of Sonia and Raskolnikov, although the she engages in prostitution, is it society which is culpable for constructing a situation in which this is her only option for survival. And while Raskolnikov initially judges her for her actions, it is made clear that he is far guiltier than she.

\textsuperscript{76} An area that deserves more attention and research is to determine the demographics of those who attended this exhibition. While this would perhaps key us into the intended audience that Kramskoi had in mind while painting this work, this is not information that I have been able to find. Additionally, a study of the reception of this work by female spectators visiting the exhibition would make an interesting and important contribution to the scholarship on \textit{Unknown Woman}. However, this is not an issue that I am able to address within the scope of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{77} While a great deal of scholarship has been done regarding the history of prostitution in Russia, theoretical models in dealing with this practice and its appearance in Russian art do not exist. As a result, my theoretical basis for this will draw from scholarship discussing similar issues in France and England. See Hollis Clayson, \textit{Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 12.
message of this work. Kramskoi presents his public with a beautiful woman as opposed to one who is venal or debauched, perhaps as a way to simultaneously attract his male viewers and then catch them in their admiration of a fallen woman. This exchange on an individual scale could then be used to exemplify Kramskoi’s rebuke of modern society as a whole for its concession of prostitution.

While the figure in *Unknown Woman* is aware of being looked at, she does not yield herself up to the viewer or positively reaffirm the gaze of a voyeuristic spectator. Instead, her reciprocal gaze protects her from a position of vulnerability or visual consumption. And although she is sexualized by the inclusion of fur and accentuated red lips and is depicted in the literal process of transaction, Kramskoi as a male artist does not construct her in a way that parades her as passive or assailable. Instead, it is the viewing public which is placed under the scrutiny of her gaze. This stands in contrast to many of the images of prostitution in the West in which the vulnerability of male artists underpinned their attempts to appear detached from their subjects and reinforce stereotypes of the prostitute’s venality.

Consequently, Kramskoi’s painting empowers the prostitute by removing her from the confines of social periphery. In entitling the work *Unknown Woman*, he is highlighting an entire demographic of Russian citizens who were treated as uniform void or mass lacking individual

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78 The precedence for showing fallen or sexualized figures as lovely or appealing can be found in numerous examples such as Manet’s *Nana* or Sargent’s *Madame X*. *Nana* is simultaneously subjected to the gaze of the male client seated in her boudoir, as well as spectator in real space whose gaze she meets. Hollis Clayson calls *Nana* a “celebration of a high-class prostitute.” While Kramskoi’s *Unknown Woman* is a critique of society as opposed to a celebration of fallen women, both exemplify the way such a figure can be portrayed as beautiful. See Clayson, *Painted Love*, 65.
80 Berger suggests that “men act and women appear,” or that women see men looking at them and begin to survey themselves a similar vision. I believe *Unknown Woman* provides a good counter example to this that while on display, the power of her gaze rules out consumption. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 47.
81 Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 87, 89.
82 Clayson, *Painted*, 1.
identity. The conventional framing of a prostitute as a receptacle for excessive male sexual passion would rob her of individuality and humanity. By portraying her as an individual, this painting removes the practice of prostitution from a position of a nebulous, stereotyped and impersonal practice. In this way Kramskoi presents a didactic work that raises awareness of the prostitute as an individual, while simultaneously implicating and castigating the contemporary viewer/patron for their participation in commercial sex in this age of modernization.

The last crucial point of comparison between Woman with an Umbrella and Unknown Woman not only gives insight into the two types of women, but also into a major facet of late nineteenth-century society—the way sartorial demonstrations served as an expression of nationalism, class and social mobility. Perhaps the most blatant contrast between these two women is the color of their clothing. While associations and symbolic meanings of colors is continually in flux and cannot be transfixed to one static interpretation, intentional uses of light and dark clothing can be found in society and the arts throughout the nineteenth century. Although dealing with images imbued with racial tension, and not merely discussing color association, I believe comments made by Griselda Pollock concerning Manet’s works are applicable here. She concludes that white bourgeois women, represent “domesticated, either virginal or maternal, femininity,” whereas those dressed in black, or those of other ethnicities ideologically associated as Other, are sexually dangerous, domineering and exotic. Similar associations can be found in a multitude of works. While reviewing a play by Balzac, fashion historian Valerie Steele highlights his overly simplistic use of color symbolism stating “Hulot’s virtuous and long-suffering wife habitually wears the white of purity.”

83 Bernstein, Sonia’s Daughters, 20.
84 Pollock, Differencing the Canon, 249.
Harvey cedes that there was at least some precedence for a black/white, male/female, gender/sex association. He attributes the dark somber color of men’s clothes to a “gravity of power” that comes from their dominance in the working world. In applying this black/white dichotomy to the visual arts, he comments that while Whistler and his model in The White Girl had intimate relations, the model dressed in white clothing and holding a white lily of the Virgin is constructed to represent purity. By contrast, he compares works by Lautrec, Cezanne, Degas, and Forain, in which women are being leered at by men dressed in black. He states that these men in uniform black give the effect that they are “less like individuals than like automata of male desire.”

Black as a color of debauchery or at least impropriety can be found in numerous works, one of the most prominent examples being Sargent’s scandalous Madame X.

These connotations of color extend into Russian literature as well. On the evening of the ball where Anna Karenina (perhaps) inadvertently attracts Vronsky away from the doting Kitty, Tolstoy employs great detail to describe the potency of Anna’s clothing:

Anna was not in lilac, as Kitty had so urgently wished, but in a black, low-cut, velvet gown, showing her full throat and shoulders, that looked as though carved in old ivory, and her rounded arms with tiny, slender wrists. The gown was trimmed with Venetian guipure. On her head, among her black hair—her own, with no false additions—was a little wreath of pansies, and a bouquet of the same in the black ribbon of her sash among white lace…Around her neck was a thread of pearls. Kitty … now seeing her black … felt that she had not fully seen her charm. She saw her now as someone quite new and surprising to her.

Similar to the treatment of lights and darks in Unknown Woman, the use of black and white in this passage creates a stunning visual contrast. It is against this adornment in black that Anna’s

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87 Ibid., 203.
88 Ibid., 218
89 Although Tolstoy recorded that his use of black here was to invoke the Greek’s association with black and wisdom, I believe this use of black is still pertinent when viewed in correlation with larger social connotations prevalent in nineteenth-century Europe. See Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 78.
charm is highlighted or emphasized. In summation, if the white dress of the Woman with an Umbrella, Kramskaya and Tretyakova represent purity and virtue, then the dark attire of Unknown Woman, just like Anna, can be read to represent sexuality and enhance her seductive allure.

**Fashioning an Identity in the Late Russian Empire**

In his famous work *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Baudelaire describes the correlation between the hierarchy of fallen women and clothing by asking, "What poet, in sitting down to paint the pleasure caused by the sight of a beautiful woman, would venture to separate her from her costume?"  

90 He characterizes the ambitious courtesan by her fine raiment of silk, satin, velvet, and ornate shoes, which by their value alone indicate her craft. In contrast, he uses the terms “hapless wretches,” and “filthy stews” to describe women of the lowest end of the spectrum, who own nothing of their own, not even the trappings of finery (which the prostitute could even rent) to enhance their appeal.  

91 The act of fashioning oneself was a major component of life in nineteenth-century Europe, and its relevancy in Russia extended not only to the world of prostitution, but also in the increasingly political atmosphere of society. The sartorial accoutrements of the figure in Unknown Woman offer valuable insight into her place within this society.

Clothing and outward appearance as an indication of identity in Russia can best be understood as beginning with Peter the Great’s eighteenth-century reforms. Not only did he change the economic and military functions of his empire, but he also altered social status of men and women in the court and instigated new sartorial regulations. His mandate stated that all
official citizens of his empire (purposefully excluding peasants) must adopt specific styles of European fashion, abandoning traditional Russian or local ethnic costume. From this point on, European dress became associated in the Russian mind with modernity and progress as well as with social status; and one’s dress became an important and overt factor in constructing identity.⁹²

As established social structures began to change between the post-emancipation period and the Russian Revolution, Slavophile sentiments of nationalism began to gain greater sway against Westerners and clothing became a perceptible way to judge one’s political alignment. As a means of proving his Slavophile sympathies, Vladimir Stasov would attend social settings in ethnic Russian costume.⁹³ Peasant attire, famously adopted by Leo Tolstoy as a means of publicizing his rejection of the hypocrisy of aristocratic life, is also clearly highlighted in the well-known Prokudin-Gorsky photograph (fig. 32).⁹⁴

Women, especially those of noble birth, sought to gain more presence in society in the progressive period following the emancipation of the serfs by obtaining greater access to education, paid employment, and public roles.⁹⁵ A major faction seeking this liberation were the Nihilists of the 1850-60s. Women joining the nihilist movement would cut their hair, wear plain skirts without petticoats or crinolines, wear blue glasses, and smoke cigarettes in public “as a declaration of independence from conventionally feminine dress and demeanor.”⁹⁶ One such woman is the protagonist in Vladimir Makovsky’s Evening Company (1875-97) (fig. 33). The woman, a democratic revolutionary, shows her political activism through her outward

⁹⁴ Ibid.
⁹⁶ Ibid.
appearance—her plain brown dress, lack of makeup and short haircut that challenge contemporary social mores of beauty and feminine propriety.  

Similarly, Nikolai Yaroshenko’s *Kursistka* (1883) (fig. 34), shows a female student with short hair, plain woolen skirt, and sweater. The book that she carries signifies her capacity for learning, while her outward gaze bravely engages the viewer, as if challenging him by her independent and progressive spirit. Both Yaroshenko and Makovsky were close associates with Kramskoi and part of the *peredvizhnik*, and *Kursistka* was shown in the eleventh exhibit with *Unknown Woman*. These works show the way the painters of this period were not only aware of the political and social factions and subversions, they were also in tune with the way that clothing served as an outward indicator of personal affiliation.

In addition to politics, clothing became an important instrument used to navigate or emulate class. Despite laws that bound emancipated serfs to the land they had previously cultivated for land owners, there was a colossal peasant migration from the rural country to urban centers, principally Moscow and St Petersburg. From 1856 to 1897, the urban population of Russian cities more than doubled from 5.2 million to 12.2 million. This migration of peasants, with their provincial attire, cast into sharper relief the already very rigid class distinctions in the capital.

The precedence for class distinction reflected in clothing was also inherent in the legacy of Peter’s sartorial reforms. European fashion and taste were originally introduced into the empire through the members of the court and then emulated by the nobility. By the late

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97 Twenty five percent of the populists in the 1870s were women, who also became involved in the terrorist activities of this faction. Jackson, *The Wanderers*, 71’ Кирсанова Сценический костюм, 238; Ruane, “Subjects into Citizens.”


nineteenth century, the equivocation with status and wealth had been long established, but due to aspects of modernity, these styles became accessible to the lower classes. In both Moscow and St Petersburg, department stores became a major attraction, particularly for women. By the mid nineteenth century, St Petersburg had been established as a center of Russian fashion, and significantly the Nevsky Prospekt became the venue for displaying European fashion to all Russia, as well as to show the fashion of Russia to Europe. European imports ranging from novels and magazines to silk stockings and parasols helped foster a climate of commodity consumption and spectacle as women became engaged in the quest for the modern and the fashionable, even if only through emulation or contact by working in the shops. The influx of provincial migrants into the major cities coincided with the development of the mass production of ready-made clothes—cheap clothes made in French styles that could easily be obtained in department stores and second-hand clothing markets. The rise of urbanization and industrialization also caused a swelling of the bourgeoisie. This stratum of nouveau riche could afford to imitate the trends in dress and manner of the Russian and European aristocracy, and they tried to procure a space in high society through demonstrating their wealth and luxury. The lower classes, being confronted with the contrast of class difference also sought to take part in this self-fashioning of class advancement, following suit in trying to imitate the styles of the bourgeois and in attempting to align themselves with European culture. In each of these instances, clothing became a tool to help camouflage the outward distinctions of class division.

100 Once again, I take my lead for this discussion from T.J. Clark in his chapter, “The View from Notre-Dame” in The Painting of Modern Life.
102 Kelly and Shepherd, Constructing Russian Culture, 109-110.
104 Ibid., 58-59.
105 Ibid.
This world of hierarchy and status driven by fashion likewise extended into the realm of prostitution. In this realm, division and status determined by economics was inseparably connected to wardrobe as a prostitute’s wardrobe could serve as the key to alter her status and ameliorate her circumstances. Those working in the cheapest brothels made less money while servicing more clients, a clientele generally comprised of soldiers and vagrants. However, a particularly attractive girl dressed in expensive attire could gain a space in plush interiors of an expensive brothel that serviced those of the wealthy classes. One visit to such a brothel could cost 100 rubles. A woman employed at a factory might earn between 5-20 rubles a month, whereas a prostitute could earn between 40-600 rubles a month, depending on her beauty and work arrangements.

One of the quickest distinguishing factors a male client could use to judge between a femme honnête or fille was her clothing. The funds a kept woman or a courtesan could receive for her services enabled her to garnish a wardrobe and accessories that were not accessible to honest married women, either because their husbands could not afford to finance both with expensive clothing, or because he preferred that his wife maintain a modest appearance while “[taking pleasure] in the courtesan and her seductive style.” And because shopping was one realm of life where women could wield power, they could perpetuate this power, as well as sexual appeal to men through their costume. This would in turn feed into the culture of

106 The issue of power is an interesting and pertinent discussion here. The question of who has power in this realm is a complex one. If a prostitute earns more money to purchase finer clothes or work in a higher quality institution, her circumstances as a prostitute have improved. However, she is still subject to selling her body for subsistence. Conversely, men patron prostitutes or provide for kept women not only out of a sexual interest, but out of what could be interpreted as a sexual need or weakness, which elevates the power of the prostitute while the male client expends his own material resources.
107 “Three centuries of the Russian Prostitution.”
108 Stites, “Prostitute and Society,” 352. See also “Three Centuries of the Russian Prostitution.”
109 Clayson, Painted Love, 56.
110 Ibid., 63
111 Ibid., 58.
sartorial imitation, as honest women and housewives would seek to imitate the styles of fallen women.  

Each of these threads dealing with facets of fashion in Russian society are sewn together in the image of *Unknown Woman*. In examining the preparatory sketches for *Unknown Woman* contrasted with the final painting, we see that while wardrobe is neglected in order to conceptualize the location and emotion of the woman, the treatment of her clothing in the final work receives just as much, if not more, painstaking detail in representation as any other aspect of the canvas. In *Unknown Woman*, just as in *Kursistka* and *Evening Company*, the careful documentation of clothing (if not purposeful dressing) of Kramskoi’s figure helps situate her in St Petersbourg society, providing visual evidence to the relevance of fashion in this world while simultaneously masking her class and true social status. In terms of class it is hard to distinguish whether the woman would have come from the social elite, bourgeoisie, or the peasantry.  

Boborikin’s reference to the woman’s gypsy like features could have implied racial difference noted in her features, leading to the possibility that she was a migrant to the city from any of Russia’s racially varied provinces, or could have merely been a commentary on the woman’s sexual associations. Regardless of her background, her clothing styles associate her with the trends of Western Europe and the finery of her golden bracelets and jeweled cap likely signify her status as a courtesan.  

Three images from winter issues of *Harper’s Bazaar* between 1876

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112 Ibid., 61.
114 Or it could just be an exposition of his own psyche as mention previously.
and 1887 show women in hats, two adorned with ostrich feathers, fur lined coats, and hands inserted into muffins (figs. 35-37). Figure 32 has the added detail of a warmly bundled mother and daughter about to go for a sleigh ride with the supplementary caption “sleighing suit.” The fur lined velvet coat, ostrich plume hat, satin bows and fur muff depicted in Unknown Woman could have been purchased from an upscale Parisian tailor or picked out from a line of readymade clothes in a department store along the Nevsky, but it is clear that the woman was looking to European styles accessible in St Petersburg when selecting her outfit. Kramskoi’s protagonist thereby gives us insight into this period of Russian society and serves as a marker of modernity. Not only does her clothing exemplify the way clothing was used to demonstrate national sentiment, but also shows the way class and even the status of a fallen woman could be masked or enhanced.

Conclusion

In returning to the statement issued by Boborikin introduced at the beginning of thesis, I believe that Ivan Kramskoi’s painting Unknown Woman is indicative of the complex attitudes and developments surrounding modernity in late nineteenth-century Russia. Having been born and raised in a small village of the Russian Empire, Ivan Kramskoi came to St Petersburg with a rural understanding of what it meant to be Russian. These ideas come to a head as he clashed with his Academic instructors over what constituted as appropriate subject matter for a Russian artist to paint, and guided his aesthetic philosophies throughout his career. As is demonstrated by the works in his oeuvre, he sought to paint themes that demonstrated his national framework. This, combined with his fervent belief in didacticism, often lead him to choose subjects who were confined to the margins of society such as peasants, or in the case of Unknown Woman, fallen women.
*Unknown Woman* has become one of Kramskoi’s most famous works, and has perhaps elicited more scholarship than any other work in his oeuvre. From its initial showing in the eleventh *peredvizhniki* exhibition, this painting has garnered praise, denunciation, and perplexity from critics have attempted to understand Kramskoi’s intriguing work. At the heart of its complexity is the gaze and expression of the woman’s face. While some who saw it viewed it as a technical triumph in painting for Kramskoi, others praised it for the beauty of the woman and the fine detail in her clothing, and finally others expressed confusion or even indignation at its allusion to the woman’s sexuality and prostitution. But these mixed reactions are indicative to the subjectivities and biases of Russian society during this modernizing period. They show both an allure for the sexuality of a fallen woman, as well as a misogyny and fear of the woman’s power. These emotions seemed to exist in Kramskoi individually, as well as in society as a whole. However, as I have argued, while this painting reveals Kramskoi’s judgment towards the woman believed to be a courtesan as a product of his age, it also shows his attempt to humanize and perhaps even inspire sympathy if not understanding for the woman by forcing the public to confront her individuality as a person and not a sequestered and indistinguishable group. And while it is clear that not everyone who saw this work understood her to be a prostitute, my contribution to the scholarship that has been done on this painting is to explore beyond conjecture of the woman’s identity or focus on her beauty to examine what elements prompted this reading.

In Russia, modernity was seen as a Western influence, and was variously accepted or rejected by the Russian public. This was distinctly demonstrated in the clothing styles of the day. While some adopted Western styles for their associations with wealth, progress, and advancement, others eschewed Western styles in favor of traditional Russian garb. Prostitution
was framed as a result of modern capitalism and industry in Russian cities, and in the case of
*Unknown Woman* used by Kramskoi censure Russian society for its declining morals. In order to
construct the link between prostitution and the West, Kramskoi carefully determined that
woman’s wardrobe and location. Her setting along the Nevsky Prospekt in St Petersburg
connotes the city’s establishment as a window to the West, and was also known a center for
institutions of modernity such as theaters and cafés that facilitated elicit amorous exchanges.
Additionally, the woman is draped in luxurious velvet, silk and fur. The style of her clothing not
only aligned her with the West, but also heightens the ambiguity surrounding the painting. Just
as was true in society and the world of prostitution, the elegance of her clothing was used to
mask the reality of her class. As expressed by a few of the critics, it is difficult to determine
whether this woman was meant to be respectable or venal, from the upper class elite, or a
courtesan who has been able to procure such finery through the financial gains of her trade. It is
this ambiguity that makes *Unknown Woman* such an intriguing and complex work, but the depth
of these complexities have been ignored or overlooked in the majority of scholarship on this
work.

With my thesis, I have attempted to show that this period of Russian art engages with
issues commonly investigated in the scholarship of nineteenth-century Western European art.
Issues of the gaze, class, gender roles, fallen womanhood, fashion, and modernity were just as
pertinent in Russia as they were in the West, but the investigation of these issues in Russia are
almost entirely absent. In seeking to examine these issues, I hope to reopen critical and
theoretical considerations of *Unknown Woman*, and by extension promote further research into
the fascinating but generally unconsidered art of late nineteenth-century Russia.
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