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COVER

The Baths of Ischia by Richard Wilson (1714–82), c1753.

Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 54.6 cm. Tate.

Identified as the baths at Casamicciola, Ischia, in the exhibition 'Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting', Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 6 March–1 June; Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales, Cardiff, 5 July–26 October *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, ed Martin Postle and Robin Simon, Yale University Press, 2014, pp348, 280 col, ISBN 9780300303851, £45



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Russia and Britain in costume albums

Works by John Augustus Atkinson (1774?/1776?–1830) & James Walker (c1760–1823?)

Ekaterina Skvortcova



James Walker (c1760–1823?) and John Augustus Atkinson (1774?/1776?–1830) are English artists who went to Russia in 1784 and then spent nearly the next twenty years there. Walker was a mezzotint engraver, already regarded as one of the best masters of his time, which is why Empress Catherine II invited him to be her Court Engraver. Atkinson was taken to Russia as a boy by Walker, who was probably his uncle on his mother's side or his stepfather.¹ In Russia the boy tried his wings as an artist. Later, in Britain his precocious talent reached its full potential.

Not only were the personal lives of Walker and Atkinson closely linked but also their artistic careers. Walker was Atkinson's first instructor in art and used his position to help Atkinson by, among other things, making engravings after some of his works. Eventually their collaboration resulted in two very fine 'costume albums' – *A Picturesque Representation of the Manners, Customs and Amusements of the Russians* (1803–4, 1812) and *A Picturesque Representation of the Military, Naval, and Miscellaneous Costumes of Great Britain* (1807). Atkinson was responsible for the plates (he made the original drawings and was his own engraver) and Walker wrote the commentaries to them, in English and French. These albums are an outstanding contribution to the genre of costume books, publications popular in the second half of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. They offer a highly interesting opportunity to compare the ways in which Atkinson and Walker described the two countries – their native Great Britain and their adopted place of residence, Russia. After many years, Russia may have felt like home to them but it was still a foreign country.

A comparison between the two publications is especially fruitful as the albums are very close in their format. They are of approximately the same size (folio volumes) and consist of an illustration on one page with an explanatory text on the facing page. There are thirty-three illustrations in the first and third volumes of the album on Russia, with thirty-four in the second volume. The same number of plates is found in

The illustrations are of works by John Augustus Atkinson (1774?/1776?–1830) in *A Picturesque Representation of the Manners, Customs and Amusements of the Russians* published by Atkinson and Walker, 1803–4 ('Russian Album'), and *A Picturesque Representation of the Military, Naval and Miscellaneous Costumes of Great Britain* published by William Miller and James Walker, 1807 ('British Album')

1 *Pilgrims*, Russian album. Soft-ground etching, 15 x 21.5 cm. State Pavlovsk Museum Reserve

2 *Boxing*, Russian album. Soft-ground etching, 15.5 x 22.2 cm. State Pavlovsk Museum Reserve

volume 1 of the album on Britain, initially intended, like the Russian publication, to be the first volume in a set of three.

A Picturesque Representation ... of the Russians was the first album to provide the British with an insight into the life of Russians and their costumes and customs.² Its success must have inspired Atkinson and Walker to create the album on Britain. Also, the experience of living in a foreign country made specific features of their homeland clearer to them. However, with the album on Britain they seemed to have come up against a serious and unexpected obstacle. We know that only one of the three projected volumes actually appeared. But why?

The Atkinson–Walker album on Britain, as well as the one on Russia, was dedicated to Emperor Alexander I and was prefaced with a graceful (and extensive) expression of their veneration of him, their personal gratitude to him, and a description of his virtues as a monarch. The dedication was signed by them both as Alexander's I 'most obedient, most devoted, and most humble servants', and this was evidently designed to facilitate the sale of the British album in Russia.

But, ironically, not only did the plan fail to work with Russian market but it also shut the door on the album's being sold in Britain. The first volume of *A Picturesque Representation ... of Great Britain* was published on 20 April 1807. Just two months later, on July 7th, Russia and France ratified the Treaty of Tilsit and Russia joined the Continental



Blockade against Britain, which precipitated the severance of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Naturally, under such circumstances, sale of the album was not possible either in Britain or in Russia. This explains why there are no copies of the album in Russian libraries, and presumably this is what prevented Atkinson and Walker from publishing the remaining two volumes. It was one of the few misjudgements in Walker's career: he habitually foresaw market trends and generally managed to derive benefits from political situations. For instance, when the political climate changed once again in 1812 and Britain and Russia became allies, with Russia gaining enormous popularity from its victory over the invading army of Napoleon, the album on Russia was cannily reissued with the intention of yielding a profit from contemporary events.

A Picturesque Representation ... of the Russians marks the end of the period when 'costume books' on Russia were created exclusively by foreign artists. In 1721, under Peter the Great, Russia had proclaimed itself an Empire and became recognised as a world power. In Europe little was known about its geography, economy or culture, so 'costume books' were published to shed some light on this foreign country. Since Peter's time Russia had steered a course of integration into Europe and foreign artists were encouraged both to work there and to take on pupils. Some of them, such as JB Le Prince, JCH Geissler and A Dalschtein, made various picture-series of traders, working within the old tradition of city 'cries' but often stretching the limits of the genre by depicting different social groups and professions, scenes of amusement, and so on.

The album by Atkinson and Walker, however, surpasses all previous 18th-century 'costume books' on Russia in the abundance and diversity of its material. Here are scenes of work and entertainment, various strata of society, ethnic types, professions, religious customs, transport, and much more. It is especially unusual in the attention that the authors devote to the depiction of labour.³ In *A Picturesque Representation of ... the Russians* there are seventeen plates showing scenes of everyday work – 'Fetching Water and Rinsing Clothes', 'Ice Cutters', 'Bathing Horses', etc. – as well as depictions of different tradesmen. This is the more valuable, as there are few examples of this type of subject in 18th-century Russian graphic work and none at all in painting. These scenes of labour are interspersed with an equal number showing scenes of leisure pursuits such as dances and games.

One topic which arose very rarely in 'costume books' on Russia is that of religious customs. Atkinson and Walker were the first among 'ethnographic' artists to realise the central-significance of the Orthodox Church within Russian culture. Their album included eight plates showing religious ceremonies and traditions ('Baptism', 'Marriage', 'Burial', 'Consecration of Waters', 'Russian Priests' etc.).

Conversely, one notable omission in *A Picturesque Representation ... in Russia* is the thorny issue of physical punishments. This was a subject frequently dealt with in foreign albums about Russia. Although watercolours by Atkinson depicting physical punishments did exist, their absence from Atkinson and Walker's album is easily explained: it was a publication dedicated to the ruler of Russia, and it was designed to be sold in that country.

The outstanding achievement of *A Picturesque Representation ... in Russia*, however, lies in Atkinson's success in catching crucial features of the national character. This, rather than the careful rendering of costume, was his primary goal. He creates a number of arresting images – modest girls in 'Village Amusements'; humble pilgrims praying by a chapel (Pl 1); 'Zbitenshik' (a trader of a hot drink called 'zbiten') distracted from his business and engrossed in sad heavy thoughts; valiant men in 'Boxing' (Pl 2); tipsy men ('A Kabak', Pl 6) who recall Nikolai Gogol's words in *Dead Souls* about the Russian character, which 'at times yearns to give her horses their head, and to let them go, and to cry, "To the devil with the world!"' Not all Atkinson's plates are so striking, but taken as a whole his characterisations outmatch both his precursors and his successors.

Unlike authors of earlier costume books on Russia, Atkinson invigorates all his illustrations with a kind of story, showing customs rather than just the costumes. Moreover, when it comes to type-pictures (tradesmen, representatives of social groups) involving no events, he motivates them with some action anyway – engaging in conversation, taking a ride, and so on. This attitude to scenes was further developed in the album on Britain. There he employs the conventions of costume books, combining a full-face depiction of one figure and a depiction of the other from the back. Initially such a composition was used to show the dress of the character from all sides, but Atkinson reinvents this convention by introducing a reason for the conversation, or by posing his figures in a natural and convincing way, with little tilts and turns ('Life Guards', 'Artillery Men', 'Sailors', Pl 8).

Furthermore, in both albums Atkinson eschews elaborate renditions and high finish in favour of a spirited sketchy manner, which justifies the description 'picturesque' in the title. In the album on Britain, Walker's annotations emphasise the fact that the scenes 'often supply very picturesque and interesting combinations of figures to exercise the skill and taste of the artist' ('Artillery on a march'). The concept of 'picturesque' in landscape painting, though influential in the pre-Romantic epoch, was rather vague but undeniably one of its main innovations was to spotlight the specific features of an ordinary countryside. However, these were understood as general distinguishing traits – types of trees, rivers, etc. rather than any single tree or river.⁵ The same 'specific features' can be observed in Atkinson-Walker's albums on Russia and Britain when dealing with different social and professional types. These albums permit us to extend the sphere of 'picturesque' from landscape painting to costume books.

The two albums resemble each other not only in format but also in the artistic manner. Nevertheless, there are some



3 *The Plough*, Russian Album. Soft-ground etching, 16 x 22.5 cm. State Pavlovsk Museum Reserve

4 *Public Festival*, Russian Album. Soft-ground etching, 23 x 35.3 cm. State Pavlovsk Museum Reserve

5 *Skating*, British album. Hand-coloured etching and aquatint 25.3 x 36.4 cm. British Museum

6 *A Kabak*, Russian Album. Soft-ground etching, 16 x 23.5 cm. State Pavlovsk Museum Reserve

7 *Ale-House Door*, British album, 1807. Soft-ground etching and aquatint, 25.3 x 18.7 cm. British Museum

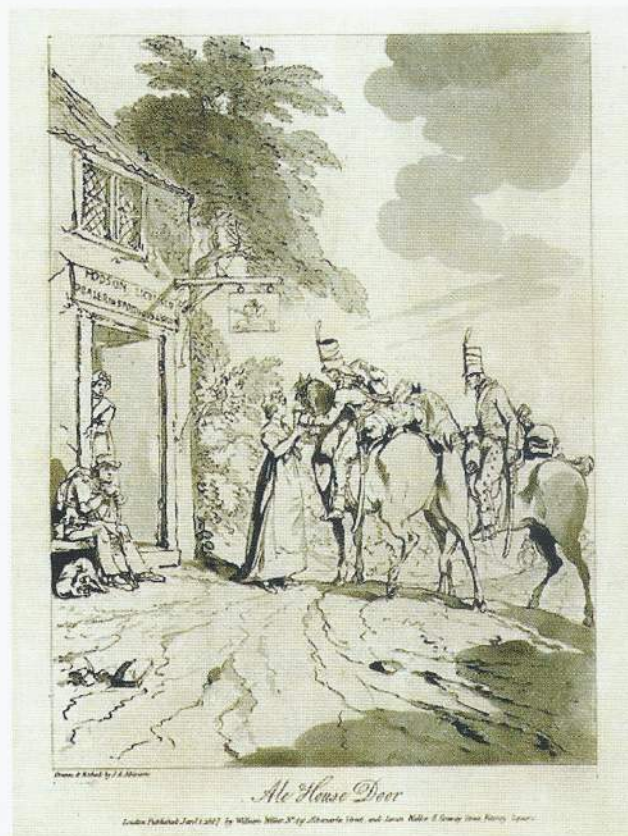


noteworthy differences, particularly in the choice of subjects. In the album on Russia all but two of the one hundred plates ('Yaeger' and 'Marriage') present the manners and customs of the lower classes – peasants, tradesmen etc. Among the thirty-three plates of the album on Britain there are three depictions of the privileged classes, represented by 'Foot Guards', 'Horse Guards' and 'Post Captain'. Presumably, the panorama of social hierarchy would have been further extended with depictions of different echelons of nobility, the judiciary, administration, church and universities in the two projected volumes that were never printed, as for instance in WH Pyne's *Costume of Great Britain*.

In *A Picturesque Representation of ... the Russians* Arkinson and Walker aimed at showing distinctive features of Russian life and concentrated on the lower classes who were not influenced by a more or less homogenous European culture. But in the album on Britain they demonstrate the national culture with images of the upper classes as well. Moreover, they emphasise the position of Britain as the most civilized country in the world, underlining those features of ordinary people's lives which were borrowed by them from the lifestyles of the selected few. As the description attached to the plate 'Sand-boy' puts it:

The degree of civilization and refinement in domestic intercourse that was formerly confined to the more elevated classes of society, has now extended itself from the castle of the noble, to the mansion of the merchant, and the parlour of the partisan.

The difference in their perception of Russia and of Britain influenced not only the selection of subjects but also their interpretation. *A Picturesque Representation ... of Great Britain* is almost completely lacking in scenes in which



people are presented as a crowd, and in which single figures merge into an abstract pattern. By contrast, such scenes are common in the album on Russia ('Katcheli', 'Ice Hills' and especially 'Public Festival', Pl 4, and 'Consecration of the Waters'). This implies that Atkinson believed that Britain was an integrated community of independent individuals (Pl 5) as opposed to Russia which he saw as a mass (Pl 4). Such an emphasis must surely be unconscious, but it is very indicative.

Another striking difference between the two albums is that in the album on Russia people are depicted as stocky. Tall figures appear only in the plates presenting the privileged classes. In 'Russian Coursing', a plate created by Atkinson for *Foreign Field Sports* (London, 1819), which shows a scene of the life of the Russian nobility, the people are slim and this lends the work an appearance of aristocratic refinement. The elegant rhythm of the hounds stretched in a gallop certainly adds to the sophistication of the picture. By contrast with the album on Russia, in *A Picturesque Representation ... of the British* all the human figures are of elongated proportions. The difference can partly be ascribed to national body types, but the key reason is that Atkinson finds British society generally more civilized and gentlemanly.

This conclusion can be confirmed by comparison of particular subjects, probably best by 'Ale-House Door' (Pl 7) from the album on Britain and 'Kabak' (Pl 6) from the album on Russia. In the commentary to the first, Walker does mention some negative effects that such an establishment might have on the population, but the picture has decent air about it. It is very different in the Russian album's 'Kabak', where the subject is treated in a clearly critical manner. But perhaps even more importantly, while there is censure in this plate, there is also empathy and commiseration with the Russian peasants whose hard life makes them seek consolation in wine. This was a totally unconventional approach to the theme, previously treated more predictably by JB Le Prince, JCH Geissler and others. Atkinson's interpretation anticipated that of later 19th-century Russian art.

Sometimes the differences in interpretation of national identity has other connotations. This can be best exemplified by comparison of the two depictions of a ploughman by Atkinson – the plate from the album on Russia (Pl 3) and the watercolour showing a British agricultural worker in the Victoria & Albert Museum (Prints & Drawings, P37-1919, WD2). While the poise and bearing of the Russian ploughman implies a sense of freedom so typical of this country, the British labourer is bent over his plough in a very careful, even pedantic way. Unlike the Russian, who is presented upon a limitless field extending beyond the horizon, his British counterpart is shown at an angle that suggests confined space.

The dissimilarity between the two albums is even more marked in the commentaries than in the plates. Some scholars have even maintained that they were written by different people. I would insist, however, that the annotations for both albums were created by Walker, and it was a difference in attitude to Russia and to Britain that strongly influenced both the style and the content. Texts to *A Picturesque Representation ... of the Russians* were written by Walker as an outside observer, whereas those to *A Picturesque Representation ... of Great Britain* were written by him as a passionate British patriot.

The texts to the album on Russia are exclusively limited to scrupulous descriptions of Russian implements, customs, and so on, unknown to the British. And in the preface Walker

quite correctly defines these commentaries as an 'accurate explanation'. He rarely mentions such things as national character, and scarcely ever tries to find psychological roots to account for the different social groups in Russia. The only exception is 'Nuns'. Here Walker points out that, among Russian nuns, there are none of those 'young victims of their own ambitions' so widespread in Europe as, since the time of Peter I, only those who were unable to be useful to society in any other way were allowed to become monks or nuns.

In the album on Britain Walker's commentaries from the very beginning expose his zealous patriotic feelings. To attract the reader's attention, the preface to the album on Russia lists remarkable but neutral facts – Russia's vast territory, unique diversity of ethnic groups, rapid increase of power. In *A Picturesque Representation of ... Great Britain*, on the other hand, he immediately declares the idea that a British superiority over the whole world was based on a higher degree of civilization. Speaking of Britain he always uses superlatives and shows ingenuity and grace in finding a literary means of expressing this national excellence. Artillery men 'have already attained a degree of excellence not easily to be rivalled', 'the houses of accommodation and refreshment for travellers in England are generally allowed to be more convenient and kept in better order than those of any other country in Europe', and even British skaters are more elegant and graceful than in 'any other part of the world'.

Walker does not avoid certain flaws in the British social system, but at once tries to soften the critics. As an example, consider his commentary to the plate 'Husbandmen', in which he laments mistakes made in agricultural policy (the enclosure of common land, for example), but says that 'the errors of this extreme are also beginning to be understood and remedied'. The same optimistic note concludes a commentary to the illustration 'Farrier's Shed', which begins with a castigation of the lack of qualified farriers. If the situation is incapable of improvement, Walker accentuates the virtues of people enduring hardships without complaint rather than the hardships themselves ('Fishermen', 'Sailors', Pl 8). Even when it comes to matters of international disapproval, such as the indiscriminate British use of riflemen or sharpshooters, Walker excuses the situation using the specious argument that there is no possibility of one party's rejecting them, since they would inevitably be used by another.

In *A Picturesque Representation ... of Great Britain*, in contrast with the album on Russia, Walker makes many observations about national character. Not only does he record typical features of the British but he offers a historical explanation for this. For instance, he considers that the exceptional qualities of the Highlanders result from a system of education, with the children of the poor taught in parochial schools and from their youth imbued with religious principles and habits of frugality and temperance. Then he supports his deductions with a concrete example. Such a pattern – describing a national characteristic, followed by an historical explanation, and concluding with a particular example – is typical of many of Walker's commentaries. Thus, he aspires to interpret the specifics of ordinary life in terms of global social and economic processes.

A heartfelt and empathetic approach to the subject affects the style of many of the commentaries in the album on Britain. The prosaic narration of the album on Russia gives way to an exciting and vivid manner of writing, which justifies Walker's claims to call his annotations

descriptive essays'. When the explanations involve many technical details, he flavours them with lyrical digressions and frequently invites his reader to complete the picture with his imagination. For instance, in the commentary on 'Heaving the Lead', he draws the reader's attention less to the technical aspects and more to the feelings of the sailor, his anticipation of comfort, pleasure and being reunited with his family.

This genre of costume albums, as demonstrated by Sam Smiles, aimed at 'making visible, what was badly in need of definition: the identity of Britain itself'⁶ – of Britain or any other country. Explaining identity is why costume albums were often devoted to exotic countries. But between 1790 and 1815 when, 'with the past receding and the future to be born, the present lacked definition',⁷ books on Britain were at the height of their popularity. Most artists limited themselves to the collecting and classifying of material, and rarely succeeded in conceptualizing the essence of the subject. This limited goal inevitably led them, as Sam Smiles points out,⁸ to detach subjects from their context – arguably their greatest failure – and typifying, dividing into thematic groups, making series of pictures. Equally, in the commentaries, authors normally refrained from assessment or analysis.

All these features, however, are characteristic of the Atkinson–Walker albums on Russia and on Britain. Though very close in format, they are far from similar in content. The differences follow not only from the objective differences between the two countries, but also from the differing attitudes that the authors had to them. This is more obvious in the commentaries than in the illustrations. Whereas the plates are equally vivid, the commentary in the album on Britain is more deeply analytical and passionate, which can be attributed to Walker's ardently patriotic attitude to Britain.



8 *Sailors*, British album, 1807.
Soft-ground etching and aquatint, 24.9 x 18.5 cm. British Museum

- 1 T Clayton, A McConnell, *Walker, James (1758/60–1822/5?)* // Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn. URL: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28488>. Access from the Government Art Collection (accessed 1 Feb 2012).
- 2 A Bird, *James Walker – britanskij graver v Sankt-Peterburge* [James Walker – a British Engraver in Saint-Petersburg] // *S beregov Temzi na berega Nevi: sbdevri iz sobranya britanskogo iskusstva v Ermitage: Katalog vystavki v Ermitage* [From the banks of the Thames to the banks of the Neva: treasures from the collection of the British art in the Hermitage: a catalogue of the exhibition in the Hermitage] / pod redakcij B Allena i L. Dukel'skoj (edited by B Allen and Larisa Dukel'skaya), 1997, p101.
- 3 GN Komelova, *Sisni iz ruskoj narodnoj gizni kotsa XVIII – nachala XIX vekov. Po grav'uram iz sobranija Gos. Ermitaga: (Al'bom)* [Scenes from the Life of the Russian People of the end of the XVIII – beginning of the XIXth centuries. After engravings from the collection of the State Hermitage: (Album)], Leningrad 1961, pp11–14.
- 4 These watercolours were later bound in the copy of the album which is kept in the National Russian library. There is an article on them by AV Yartseva: Yartseva A. V. *Al'bom Dzbona Avgusta Atkinsona 'Zhivopisnoye izobrazheniye nraov, obichaev i razvlechenij russkih' iz sobriya RNB* [Album 'A Picturesque Representation of the Manners, Customs and Amusements of the Russians' by John Augustus Atkinson from the collection of the Russian National library] // *Problemi razvitiya zarubejnogo iskusstva: Materiali XI Nauch. Konf. V Pamyat Professora M.V. Dobroklonskogo* [The Problems of Development of European art: Abstracts of the XIth Academic Conference in Memory of Prof. M.V. Dobroklonskij]. Saint-Petersburg 1998.
- 5 MV Vojtenko, *Predromantizm v Anglijskom Pejzazbnom Iskusstve Vtoroj Polovini XVIII Veka: Avto-ref. Dis. na Soisk. Uch. St. Kand. Isk.* [Pre-Romantism in English Landscape Art of the Second Half of the XVIIIth Century]. Saint-Petersburg 2002, pp19–20.
- 6 S Smiles, *Eye Witness: Artists and Visual Documentation in Britain 1770–1830*, Aldershot 2000, p183.
- 7 *Ibid*, p182.
- 8 *Ibid*, p176.