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## HAYAKAWA, Mei. Reconsideration of the Contemporary Significance of *Sadko* in the *Underwater Kingdom* by Ilya Repin

The year 2019 was the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Russian painter Ilya Repin (1844–1930). Exhibitions from 2018 to 2019 (in Moscow) and 2019–2020 (in Saint Petersburg) provided an opportunity to position each of his works with his whole oeuvre. These exhibitions, as well as research undertaken by the author at the Russian State Library, demonstrate that even though *Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom* (hereafter *Sadko*) is now used as an eye-catching piece in exhibitions, it has been little researched and lacks a scholarly discussion of its background; in other words, there is no accumulation of research on *Sadko*. Previous studies have demonstrated that *Sadko* is the earliest artwork on a national theme in Russian painting, that it is an exceptional work created on Repin's first trip abroad (mainly to Paris), or that it is a failed work with which the creator was not satisfied. However, few studies have focused on the painting's contemporary significance, such as its novelty and reactions to the work when it was first exhibited.

This paper discusses some aspects of *Sadko* that would have appeared original to contemporary viewers and the way Repin constructed such a novelty. In this paper, the author summarizes the Russian oral epic (bylina) about the wealthy merchant Sadko, which constitutes the main theme of the painting, and surveys contemporary materials regarding *Sadko* by Repin and his contemporaries, such as Repin's letters and reviews in periodicals at the time the painting was exhibited. The survey covers Repin's published letters from 1873 (when he started his first trip abroad) to 1876 (when he referred to some art reviews on *Sadko*) as well as articles by contemporary critics referred to in Repin's letters. His letters to Vladimir Stasov, a well-known critic who was close to Repin, provide a key source because in them the artist refers mainly to the work.

This study also presents findings on the production process of *Sadko*. For the painting, Repin chose one of the most famous scenes of this bylina. However, while *Sadko* has sometimes been considered the first oil painting based on the bylina, the work is not the first visual image of it. In fact, Repin saw illustrations of the bylina while he was producing the work. To create one of the earliest oil paintings depicting the underwater world, he went to an aquarium. He may have seen illustrations of marine life as well.

Although Repin changed his perspective on art during the almost three years that it took to create *Sadko*, he criticized it based on his former conception of art. Some earlier studies evaluate this work negatively based on Repin's self-criticism. However, considering the relationship between Repin and Stasov—a fledgling art student and an already famous critic—and Repin's fear of harsh criticism of *Sadko*, Repin's self-criticism may have helped in gaining Stasov's support.

Contemporary reviews reveal that critics had expected Repin to represent the charm of Russian people. They wanted to see a mere visualization of the bylina without the artist's original touch, while he shows his originality in *Sadko*. The reviews also indicate that Repin's original expression in *Sadko* attracted attention, particularly, for example, his depiction of the underwater world and the princesses of the sea king. While working on *Barge Haulers on the Volga* in Russia before painting *Sadko* in Paris, Repin had wanted to draw costumed women but did not, following the advice of a friend. When he left his Russian homeland, he could finally paint costumed women—this time dressed like sea princesses—which symbolize in *Sadko* the charm of Western Europe.

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