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Turn-of-Century Russia in Color

By Joy Neumeyer

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Most of Prokudin-Gorsky's negatives are now in the Library of Congress.

In the "Russian Empire in Color" exhibition at the Photo Center, photographs by Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky reveal the churches, landscapes and inhabitants of the late Russian Empire in brilliant whites, sharp blues and rich purples.

A famous photographer, inventor and chemist, Prokudin-Gorsky invented a three-color method of photography with German scientist Adolf Miethe that projected monochrome negatives with red, green and blue light to achieve the illusion of color. Their announcement of the method's success in 1902 marked the formal beginning of color photography.

In 1909, Prokudin-Gorsky won a commission from Tsar Nicholas II, a photography buff, to travel across Russia, documenting its people and places with his new technology. For his expeditions, the tsar granted Prokudin-Gorsky a steamship, a Ford automobile, a train car specially outfitted with a photo development lab and permission to photograph anything he pleased.

The exhibition favors Prokudin-Gorsky's bucolic scenes of monasteries rather than his documentation of Russia's rapid industrialization and diverse populace, and gives little hint of change or unrest. In doing so, however, it offers a vivid glimpse into the twilight of the Russian Empire. The Bolshevik Revolution's anti-religious fervor soon would destroy many of the photographs' pristine white monasteries and sturdy wooden churches; collectivization would uproot the peasants who appear in bright, traditional village dress.

Gallery director Valery Nikiforov said Prokudin-Gorsky was "first and foremost an inventor and technologist" who was primarily interested in photography as a way to "test his achievements through practice." He also gave illustrated lectures across Western Europe and Russia to promote public knowledge of his work.

After the Revolution, Prokudin-Gorsky immigrated to Western Europe, taking 2,300 negatives with him. His descendants donated most of them to the Library of Congress in Washington, where they remain today. Most of the few originals of Prokudin-Gorsky's work in Russia are in the hands of private collectors.

Nikiforov said the "great strength" of Prokudin-Gorsky's photographs lies in their "documentary precision." In addition to preserving the Russian Empire in historical memory, the photos also have a practical application: Some churches are being restored with the help of Prokudin-Gorsky's work.

The exhibition is part of the Photo Center's series highlighting the history of the Russian state and the Romanov tsars. It will culminate in 2013 with a series of programs honoring the 400th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. In addition to the Prokudin-Gorsky photographs, the Photo Center is showing a companion exhibit, titled "The Unknown Romanovs." Alongside famous portraits of the last imperial family, the exhibition also features rarer, more intimate scenes, such as Nicholas II shoveling snow at Tsarskoye Selo.

"The Russian Empire in Color" runs through Nov. 14 at the Photo Center gallery, 8 Gogolevsky Bulvar. Metro Kropotkinskaya. Tel. 690-6996, www.foto-expo.ru.

For more photography by Prokudin-Gorsky, see the Library of Congress collection online at www.loc.gov/exhibits/empire.

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