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Italy too sweet. Russian landscape painters travelling central Europe. The case of Savrasov and Shishkin

I. Introduction

It seems that nowadays, just as in the past, any research area related to Russia and its art is contaminated with the issue of the “East or West” binary scheme that has been present in notions of Russia at least since Pyotr Chaadayev’s *Philosophical Letters*.¹ With respect to the rather modest development of Russian landscape painting, encapsulated roughly within the two decades from 1850 to 1870, I will pursue the following related questions: Is it permissible to consider landscape painting in the scheme of “Eastern” or “Russian” versus “Western” or “European”? and What was the role of travel and migration of artists and works of art in the genesis of the image of the Russian landscape in the fine arts.

In landscape painting the issue of the binary scheme takes the form of the question: Did Russian artists merely transfer well-known artistic procedures into the Russian subject palette or did they create new methods for portraying the Russian landscape based on its own endogenous stimuli? As Russian landscape painting is rooted in a shared tradition derived from academic training, which was relatively uniform from Russia across Europe to the USA, Mexico and South America, there could be no more significant differences than this shared tradition permitted. Nevertheless, even such nuances are important, as paintings by the Russian artists Ivan Shishkin (1832–1898) or Alexei Savrasov (1830–1897) have become a model for what Russian landscapes should look like. These artists played the same role in the history of imagining the Russian natural environment as Claude Lorrain or Jacob van Ruisdael in its West European equivalent. However, the most influential predecessors of the Russian landscape painters were poets, who were the first to create the “myth” of a uniquely Russian nature. Alexander Pushkin, Afanasy Fet, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Tyutchev and others created impressive literary landscape portraits² that were hard

to equal³ but equally difficult to depart from. Therefore, Russian painters followed the path suggested by writers long into the 19th century.⁴

Russian landscape painting was formed through a complicated dialogue between the Russian academic tradition (the St. Petersburg Academy and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture), gradual learning about European art production and the developing Russian tradition resulting in the work of the Peredvizhniki and their circle. The aim of this study is to compare Russian landscape painting of the 1850s to the 1870s with the equivalent art production of Central and Western Europe with which Russian artists came into contact both while traveling and in their home country.

In this paper I want to focus on artists who had direct contact with the landscape painting of the German-speaking countries, Switzerland and France and became painters with great influence on the Russian fine arts scene. Savrasov and Shishkin respectively will be the focus of the study; they were artists who enriched Russian landscape painting with a number of new motifs, many of which had already been sketched by writers of Pushkin and Tyutchev’s generation, who had been the first to place consistent emphasis on Russian nature.⁵ Following Shishkin’s journey through Central Europe will be the most prominent part of the study, for it was there that his reputation as a painter grew as a result of contact with the contemporary centers of landscape painting.

In the 19th century Russian landscape painting began to work on numerous motifs that had previously been outside the focus of artists. These include the steppe, vast expanses of grain fields, the wild Russian primeval forests, the deserted shores of northern lakes, birch thickets, barren suburban areas, and muddy, impassable roads. Such motives, which we today consider typical for depictions of Russian

nature, underwent a major process of change during their 'canonization' in the 19th century. It is these changes that will be the primary focus of this study: the changes in understanding forest and steppe motifs and the relationship of figures to the landscape, an aspect to which the intensive dialogue with the Central European environment was crucial. One legacy of Russian 19th century to the fine arts scene was a complex system of depicting these motifs. The lingering question is, however, to what extent it was influenced by knowledge of the Western – specifically German and Swiss – landscape painting, so very popular in the Russia of the day.

The 19th- and 20th-century research into Russia's relationship with Central Europe as regards landscape painting underwent a complex evolution that mirrors the socio-political situation of its day. For instance, the renowned Russian art critics Vladimir Stasov, Alexandre Benois and Abram Efros,⁶ aside from their differing opinions of particular artists, tended to compare Russian landscape painting to its European counterpart and evaluate it on the same basis. So for Benois Vasilyev was nothing but a Russian 'Düsseldorferian', while for Efros he was a 'Barbizonian'. Stasov, Benois and Efros wrote analyses and comparisons of Russian paintings with the work of German or French painters, with which they were intimately familiar, but their intention was to evaluate individual paintings and artists rather than to examine them, and so their percipient remarks and partial analyses failed to result in any deeper understanding of the relationship between Russian and Central European landscape painting.

Art historians of the Soviet era could have gained from the turbulent development of art history had it not been for the unfortunate fact that they were not able to study artistic relationships between Russia and Europe for a number of reasons; many Soviet art historians were unable to travel and hence to gain first-hand experience of works that had been important for Russian art production of the 19th century. And even if they had travelled, the social and political demand, especially in the Stalinist era, was for a story of Russian art as an autonomous entity that developed independently of its environment, in the context of the struggle for democracy and nationalism in art, which

had naturally reached its acme in the works of the Russian realists. The strict division of Soviet historians into those who specialized in non-Russian art and those who focused on Russian art also played its part in this development. This has repercussions to this day in the continuing division of academic institutes of art history into "world" and "Russian" fields.

Nevertheless, the comparative method survived and was cultivated even in Soviet art history, at least until the time of the Thaw, primarily in the oral form of lectures, thanks to authorities including Alexei Fedorov-Davydov, who was of the opinion that "Russian art, although it would like to see itself next to French, is closest to German art".⁷ No written overview of this stance was produced, however. The groundbreaking publication was Dmitry Sarabyanov's *19th-Century Russian Painting among the European Schools*,⁸ which was the first work to examine the relationship between Russian and European art, primarily through examples of paintings from the 19th century. Sarabyanov later synthesized his conclusions in his study entitled *Russia and the West*,⁹ but unfortunately insufficient focus is given to landscape painting in this work.

Researchers on the other side of the Iron Curtain had limited access to artworks in Soviet collections. Nonetheless, at least two studies emerged that aimed to include some Russian landscape paintings of the 19th century in the Central European context.¹⁰ Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Bettina Baumgärtel¹¹ and Galina Churak¹² have explored the relationships of Russian artists with the Düsseldorf School within a large exhibition project.

II. The Path to Discovering European Landscape Painting in Russia

Russian painters gained their first contact with contemporary West European art through art collections in large cities such as St. Petersburg or Moscow. Especially significant was the private collection of Count N.A. Kushelev-Bezrodko, which included works by the Barbizon School and by German, Belgian and Dutch painters, and is today housed in the Hermitage. This collection was accessible to artists, and after 1864 it became a part of a freely accessible institution with a permanent exhibition.¹³ It was particularly important for those artists who could not or would not travel

outside their home country for various reasons, as was the case of the Russian landscape painters Fyodor Vasilyev and Isaac Levitan. Vasilyev never travelled further than the Volga river and to Crimea, where he sought a cure for his tuberculosis, though with no effect, while Levitan first went abroad at the age of 29, as a mature painter with his own artistic opinions. The Kushelev collection was therefore a point of orientation for young painters. Vasilyev even named the Kushelev gallery as one of his most prominent 'teachers' of the art of landscape painting.¹⁴

Like other European academies, Russian institutes also encouraged meticulous study and copying of selected works of art.¹⁵ In the Kushelev gallery, paintings by the Achenbach brothers and artists from the Barbizon School were among the most copied works.

However, there were also plenty of Russian landscape painters who did go on study tours to Europe, whether for longer or shorter periods of time. The most traditional destination of Russian artists was Italy, where painters such as Aleksandr Ivanov, Sylvester Shchedrin or Mikhail Lebedev created their best works. However, in the 1850s Russian landscape painters began to shun Italy in favor of Germany, Switzerland, and France. The artists exchanged the picturesque Italian nature for the opportunity to discover lively art centers, academies and studios of individual artists. Shishkin said the following in regard to Italy: "And I would not go to Italy even if I had the chance – I do not like it much, for it is so sweet that it hurts."¹⁶ His words expressed the feelings of many of his peers, who traded the opportunity to work in the sceneries immortalized by Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin sceneries for the chance to discover the trends in landscape painting of their time in Paris, Düsseldorf or Geneva.

Landscape painters often set off on a long tour abroad after graduating from their art schools. Most painters came from the two most important Russian institutions – the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Artists often entered these institutions very young, at 14 or 15 years of age, and it was quite common for them first to spend some time at the Moscow School of Painting and then to finish their art studies at the Imperial Academy of Arts.¹⁷ The

duration of an art degree might therefore be high on ten years.

At the St. Petersburg Academy a relatively complicated system of assessing individual works of art was in place. Three times a year the Academy Board awarded selected artists first- and second-degree silver medals. Often it was draughtsmanship that was subject to evaluation, so not only finished paintings were taken into account. The Academy also awarded a bronze medal each year for academic achievement. But the most prestigious award to be had was the major gold medal. The Academy ran a competition for the gold medal every year, but only students in the final phase of their studies could take part. Students who wanted to participate had to present a painting on a selected topic to the jury.¹⁸ The Academy usually commissioned a topic specific to a genre¹⁹ and this was especially important for the historic painting studio, where the jury aimed to test the talent of their students in complicated figural depictions. In landscape painting the motif was of less importance and artists could select it themselves. Usually only one medal was awarded each year, or two at most.²⁰ The winners of the gold medal were given not only a relatively generous sum of money but also the right to a study tour abroad that could take 3–5 years and was paid for by the state.

The artist chose the destinations of their voyages themselves. Switzerland was most popular among Russian (and European) landscape painters in the 1850s, partly thanks to its picturesque natural environment, and partly because it was the place of residence of painters who enjoyed great popularity and aroused interest in the whole of Europe, such as Alexandre Calame, or the lesser known Rudolf Koller or Francois Diday. Calame (1810–1863) was particularly popular in Russia. Theophile Gautier, who visited Russia in 1857, wrote that anyone who considered themselves a connoisseur of art owned paintings by Horace Vernet or Alexandre Calame.²¹

Russian artists combined various intentions in their travels abroad: they visited art collections and specific natural environments (such as the Alps or Normandy), they joined art institutions (the Düsseldorf Academy), and visited the studios of renowned artists (including Calame and Koller). Aleksey Bogolyubov

(1824-1896)²² was an important mediator and pioneer in Russia's relations with Europe in the area of landscape painting. A graduate of the St. Petersburg Naval Cadet Corps, he ultimately focused on art instead and finished his studies at the St. Petersburg Academy in 1853. The major gold medal secured him a trip abroad; he studied in Geneva with Alexandre Calame, in Düsseldorf with Andreas Achenbach²³ and in Paris, where he met Camille Corot and Charles-François Daubigny in person. These very personal contacts with prominent European artists – Bogolyubov helped Achenbach to paint ships, as he was very familiar with their construction, for instance – made the Russian artist a natural mediator of the artistic trends of that time among the young generation, including Shishkin and Savrasov.²⁴ Using example of these two artists, I will demonstrate some features of the mobility of Russian artists and show how their experience is mirrored in their work.

III. Savrasov

In the 1850s and 1860s in particular, a number of new methods and approaches can be seen in Savrasov's works, including experiments with light, from morning light to noon and evening light, and application of the composition techniques of artists such as Claude and Ruisdael. Paintings dating from before his trip abroad are made according to the principles of that time, with interspersing elements derived from the study of nature and elements sourced from the repertoire of painting history. For instance, his *Landscape with Oaks and a Shepherd* (1860) represents an attempt to adopt artistic notions of nature from previous periods – the oak trees are probably adopted from Dutch painting of the 17th century, while the shepherd figure and the shapes of the cattle stress the pastoral feeling of the whole scene as in sentimental Russian short stories of the late 18th century. The direct lighting of the foreground is also very telling, while the background is cloaked in shadows.²⁵ Similarly, the contemporary notion of "picturesque" is applied in *View of Pechersk Lavra in Kiev from the Dnieper* (1852)²⁶, where the composition is structured by a lone tree in the old Dutch style or as seen in the works of the Achenbach brothers, who were inspired by this style.²⁷ These pieces are not dissimilar to Central European production – there are dif-

ferences in the of lighting, which is brighter in Central European landscape paintings but more muted and atmospheric in Savrasov's work, with the choice of colours being more effective in expressing the mood of each phase of the day, and Savrasov was also undeniably inspired by Aivazovsky, who was popular at the time. His *Ukraine landscape* (1849) essentially exudes the spirit of picturesque poetry through its established composition schemes. Rabus, Savrasov's teacher from the Moscow School, encouraged him to copy Calame in addition to the old masters. Two of his drawings from the 1850s remain from that time, but they are mostly free variations on Calame-style topics rather than direct copies. What is telling is that the motifs are closely related to natural landscapes well known to Savrasov.



Fig. 1 Aleksey Kondratievich Savrasov, *Landscape with Oaks and a Shepherd*, 1860, Oil on canvas, 77,5 x 66,5 cm, Moscow, The Sate Tretyakov Gallery

Aside from such paintings, in the same period Savrasov also created works that were highly original in terms of the choice of motif and its realization. These are primarily pictures with motifs that had no stable art grammar in the visualization of landscape, such as his early chef d'oeuvre *Steppe in the Daytime* (1852), which provides "an impressive early example of the realist celebration of Russian space".²⁸ Only once he began his travels abroad did Savrasov

gain a clear voice as a painter. With the financial assistance of the Moscow Society for Art Lovers he set out on a several-month long journey to Europe, starting in London at the World Exhibition, where he was impressed by British landscape painting, in particular John Constable and Richard Bonnington, both of whom he valued for the simplicity of their motifs and their execution. From London Savrasov set out for Switzerland, via Paris and Germany, and ultimately spent the largest part of his tour in Switzerland. He worked on motifs of the Swiss Alps, and also visited Calame's studio in Geneva. However, once he became more familiar with the master's work, and having seen the London exhibition, Savrasov admitted that Calame lost his appeal for him.²⁹ Despite that fact, he painted several pieces in Calame's style, some while still in Switzerland, others to be finished on his return to Russia. Savrasov opted for similar mountain scenery to the Swiss painter, but while in Calame's work a stormy sky mirrors the wilderness of the mountains and black spruces loom over jagged rocks,³⁰ Savrasov seeks the opposite, and his dramatic peaks of steep mountains are contrasted by clear skies rather than storms. The surface of lakes has a similar function and usually remains calm. Calame, in an effort to make the panorama of the Alps theatrical, intensifies nature's reality, placing robust masses of stones or fallen tree trunks in the foreground, among which the tiny staffage disappears, and the middle ground fades away in an aerial perspective that graduates the verticality of the scene and renders the mountains pronounced, making them appear further away and monumentalizing them, usually as the closing point of the painting. Savrasov uses a similar concept of the foreground in some of his paintings; however, Calame's work enables him to realize what it is he does not like: too expressive, drawing-like, effective painting. In Savrasov's works, unlike Calame, the landscape is mostly depicted as calm and horizontal and the cloudy sky becomes the main carrier of the painting's mood, intensified by the reflection of the sky in the water surface.

After his return to Russia, Savrasov created several Swiss-themed paintings, most of which met with criticism. His critics argued that to paint a true depiction of Switzerland he had not spent enough time in

the country.³¹ Mostly, however, he focused on the nature of Central Russia, pictured in various seasons and daylight.



Fig. 2 Alexandre Calame, *Un Lac des Alpes (In het Berner Oberland)*, 1847, Oil on canvas, Inv.nr. SA 9, Amsterdam Museum

For Savrasov, the journey abroad was important for his awareness of the blind alley of effective but lifeless landscape painting. Nevertheless, there are many paintings in his body of work that continued to draw on the worn effectiveness of late Romanticism. Savrasov, like Calame,³² was able to work in several modes and to combine motifs of various origins to express the subject of the painting. This inventive force may be called pictorial strategy in landscape painting. From Western European, especially English landscape painting, Savrasov took above all the concept of simplicity and moderation in depicting the landscape. There was little that he could apply in terms of the European principles of landscape painting in depicting motifs from Russian nature, however, and to what would have been principal, such as the loose brush strokes in Barbizonian paintings, Savrasov had not taken a liking. Therefore, he had to work independently on the subject of Russian landscape, innovating compositions and colour layouts. If there was anything that Savrasov took from Calame and others, it was the effort to express the landscape's mood. Where Calame brings expression through forms, Savrasov more often does so with colours, tones and shades; but all in all, multiple styles are characteristic for both painters.

IV. Shishkin

Ivan Shishkin, a painter with his origins in Central Russian Yelabuga, came to know Central European landscape painting most intensively, perhaps rivalled only by Bogolyubov. A number of methods and motifs from the romantic realist Central European tradition are discernible in his work as well, though applied in an original way.

Shishkin studied first at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (1852–1856) under Appolon Mokritsky, his first teacher. He continued at the Saint Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts, where he worked in the landscape painting studio under the romanticism-oriented Maxim Vorobyov from 1856 to 1860, spending several summers on Valaam island, where the Academy sent young artists to “study nature”. Among Shishkin’s early works there are paintings made in the composed landscape painting style, such as *View of the Outskirts of St. Petersburg* (1856), in which the effort to execute individual elements realistically is visible, but the composition, with the view through the trees, is an obvious reference to 17th-century classical landscape painting.³³ Some of the greatest early works by this painter are the paintings he made on Valaam island, one of which – *View of Valaam* – earned him a major gold medal and the chance of a foreign tour. Like other students of the Academy, Shishkin became acquainted with Central European landscape painting via the collections in St. Petersburg. Mokritsky recommended that the young artist study Calame, as he “*excels not only in truthfulness, but also in grace*”.³⁴

Unlike Savrasov, who described his European journey in just a few laconic letters, Shishkin left both correspondence and a journal from the period of his travels. In April 1862, Shishkin and the painter Valery Jacobi set off on a trip through the German lands, where they visited Berlin and Dresden, and later went to Prague for several weeks to visit the studios of prominent Czech artists. Shishkin was especially impressed by studies of the Slavonic types of Josef Mánes.³⁵

In the first period of his travels, Shishkin created a couple of drawings depicting Dresden and the Troja Castle in Prague. It is symptomatic that what he sought out above all in nature was motifs similar to

those he knew from Russian nature. In Prague’s Střemovka Park it was the birch trees that caught his attention, reminding him of the birch thickets in Russia.³⁶

This mirrors not only his prevalent interest in Russian nature, but also the rising nationalism of the 1860s.³⁷

From Bohemia, Shishkin continued to Munich to spend the autumn and part of the winter there, but from his letters it is clear that the Munich School left scant impression on him. The most important phase of his development as a painter began after his arrival in Zurich in the spring of 1863. Shishkin’s intention in going there was to improve his skill at painting animals under a now rather forgotten painter, Rudolf Koller (1828–1905).³⁸ Koller, an adherent of the Düsseldorf School and a sort of Swiss Troyon, was considered the pre-eminent animal painter of Central Europe. He was also an adept landscape painter, who together with fellow painter Robert Zünd represented a counter-balance to Calame’s and Diday’s depictions of Switzerland, as they stressed the idyllic, Rousseau-like image of Swiss nature. Koller was a follower of Carl-Friedrich Lessing and Johann Schirmer in terms of landscape painting. Like theirs, Koller’s landscape painting is also based on drawn studies that depict nature in great detail, and he would create the final painting on the basis of these drawings in his studio. Shishkin spent the whole spring and autumn of 1863 in Koller’s studio, copying his drawings and taking his advice. Thanks to this ‘internship’ under Koller, Shishkin came to a deeper understanding of the landscape painting system of the Düsseldorf School, which he would later develop in his famous paintings created in Russia. In contrast to the old generation of idealists (Cornelius, Overbeck, Pferr), the landscape painting program of the Düsseldorf School was founded on working with realistic, non-idealised elements of nature that built up the final depiction.³⁹

That is the reason why the major part of the painting oeuvre of artists such as Schirmer and the Achenbach brothers consists of numerous detailed studies and drawings of trees, plants, rocks and details of nature. The resulting works were designed not only to cultivate a sense of beauty but also to foster a national consciousness and love of their homeland through portrayals of its landscape.⁴⁰ It is also one of the reasons why the national landscape became the centre



Fig. 3 Rudolf Koller, *Die Richisau*, 1858, Oil on canvas, 82 x 101 cm, Museum Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur



Fig. 4 Ivan Ivanovich Shishkin, *View in the Environs of Düsseldorf*, 1864-65, Oil on canvas, 37 x 52,8 cm, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery

of attention for painters. Landscape paintings of each country at that time created their own semantic dominants, represented by specific aspects of nature consisting of particular topographic elements (such as mountains or historic sites) or certain species of plants or animals typical of each country, which created something akin to *aide-memoire*. Shishkin also learned the Düsseldorf School method of landscape composition from Koller – the foreground usually composed of plants, worked out in detail but remaining remote to the viewer despite its minute rendition, as if seen from above with scientific objectivity. The middle ground is clearly detached from the foreground, graduating the depth of the painting which is indicated by the opening to the landscape, or to landscape elements that create a sense of distance (e.g.

mountains). Beside the overall structure of the Düsseldorf School work and composition, Shishkin also had a chance to discover the paintings of Koller's friend, Robert Zünd (1827-1909), whose way of constructing composition, light, choice of motif, and interpretation of the European painters was perhaps the closest to Shishkin's. Although there is no mention of Zünd in Shishkin's letters it is possible that this pupil of Calame and Diday could have been known to Shishkin personally.

That summer, Shishkin left for the Bernese Oberland, where he was to work on a painting for the collector Nikolay Bykov. In creating this painting, known by the working name *After the Storm*, Shishkin also used Koller's advice.⁴¹ He felt, however, that the Swiss painter's advice had not helped him to finish his painting, not taking it beyond the level of another study.⁴²

At the beginning of the next year Shishkin made a brief foray to Geneva with the intention of visiting the studios of Calame and Diday, only to find that Calame was residing in Italy temporarily. He therefore only had the chance to meet Diday, whose studies impressed Shishkin, though his paintings were apparently 'not worth it'.⁴³ Unlike many Russian landscape painters, Shishkin's relationship with Calame was relatively indifferent. Shishkin never sought the drama of the elements that was at the heart of Calame's works. In just one letter Shishkin mentions the recently deceased Calame, who 'although now forgotten and often disparaged by artists, is yet resurrected by his great work'.⁴⁴

After a short stay in Paris and a return to work in Switzerland, Shishkin left for Düsseldorf, and remained in that region until his return to Russia in the late spring of 1865. He arrived in Düsseldorf as an experienced artist with the aim of studying etching. Düsseldorf landscape painting was still thriving on the legacy of the works of Schirmer and the Achenbach brothers. Schirmer was especially close to Shishkin,⁴⁵ both for his penchant for detailed drawing and for his choice of motifs.⁴⁶ Schirmer, one of the first portraitists of the "German" forest (see *Deutscher Urwald* from 1828), expressed an extremely keen interest in depicting flora and trees at various times of the day and in different lights. Schirmer's nature studies are particularly close to

Shishkin's portrayals of trees painted after his return to Russia.

It was also in Düsseldorf that Shishkin created a painting that appeared to bring together the sum of his experiences from his studies in Russia and abroad. *View in the Environs of Düsseldorf* (1865) is an outstanding example of 1860s academically realistic landscape painting that outclasses all the other paintings he made during his travels abroad.⁴⁷ The landscape is portrayed from above, rendering the foreground somehow distant and not suggesting the physical closeness of the landscape to the viewer. The small staffage creates a measuring scale, monumentalizing the landscape while also lending it a certain idyllic ambience. In the centre of the painting there are trees, which separate the illuminated and shaded parts of the painting. Creating rhythm using well-lit and shaded sections of landscape was a common technique in the Düsseldorf School repertoire. The viewer's eye is drawn from the rural cabins to the pleasant natural features in the distance, and its low-key character is dramatized by the light streaming through the clouds. The linear scenery of the trees intensifies the depth of the space. The painting depicts a specific place in the landscape, but its topography is downplayed in order to generalize the landscape to the level of common elements of similar natural settings. The landscape, though understood as a national feature by Shishkin,⁴⁸ always mirrors a broader experience of nature, which Shishkin attempted to express no less urgently than the French impressionists.⁴⁹

The paintings from Shishkin's travels abroad are different from his later works, both in the choice of colours and in the elevated point from which the landscape is depicted, which aligns them closer to the Düsseldorf School style of production. Shishkin's work also corresponds to that of the Düsseldorf School in that it gradually moves staffage out of its focal point. Like the German and Swiss landscape painters, Shishkin seems to offer an illustration of Friedrich Theodor Vischer's words that staffage is an inferior component of painting that may be omitted.⁵⁰ He depicts traces of human activity more often than humans themselves. However, his later work demonstrates a clear shift from the Düsseldorf methods. As



Fig. 5 Ivan Ivanovich Shishkin, *Rye*, 1878, Oil on canvas, 107 x 187 cm, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery

Rudolf Zeitler remarked, while the Düsseldorf School works with panoramas or landscape backdrops, with the whole scene somehow distant and its sensuality diminished due to the adoption of a viewpoint from above, Shishkin uses the "detailed realism" of the foreground to create a depth to the painting without sacrificing its sensory qualities.⁵¹ In this way he takes the Schirmer method of thorough study of foreground elements to new levels of expressive potential. One can "enter" Shishkin's paintings, participate in them physically, while the Düsseldorf distant landscapes, though they use the same academic formula to build up space, are limited to no more than optical experience, where only the viewer's eye travels through the landscape. Even the size of many of Shishkin's works is so vast that the viewer cannot encompass them within a single glance, losing themselves in the forest depths or expanses of grain fields. This is especially evident in a comparison of *View in the Environs of Düsseldorf* with the famous *Rye*. Though his work retains many aspects in common with the Düsseldorf School, Shishkin overturns its approach to landscape. Many echoes of the influence of the Düsseldorf School can be seen in a lot of the paintings Shishkin created after his return, but back in Russia he was confronted with a different kind of nature than the Central European painters, and therefore had to significantly transform the methods learned during his travels in order to be able to express the specific nature of the Russian landscape, especially its vast space, seen as its fundamental characteristic since the time of Tyutchev. To accommodate and convey this, Shishkin changed the standard structure of his paintings from one composed of a foreground, middle

ground and background and often worked instead with only a background and a foreground, which enabled him to portray the impression of the Central Russian plains. He succeeded in creating impressive depictions of the Russian landscape precisely because of his ability to develop and manipulate the received scheme hitherto widespread in depictions of landscape in the Central European environment.

Both Shishkin and Savrasov were able to paint in different manners and to emulate other European masters if necessary. Their work is full of traces testifying to the Central European influence on their artistic development. Both painters, however, select precisely those Central European pictorial strategies which resonated with their own artistic visions and which helped them to express the Russian landscape, which became their main subject of interest. Central European and Russian landscape painting of the 19th century is not a simple mirror of nature but rather a “Wohnplatz des geistigen Lebens” as the 19th century German philosopher Johann Herrmann Lotze⁵² termed it, and in that way it should be seen. Realistic depiction of nature is thus merely a starting point for the human imagination. In the painting the objective world of nature becomes a reflection of human subjectivity.⁵³

Reviewed by Jessica Taylor-Kucia

Endnotes

1. Pyotr Chaadayev (1794–1856) was a Russian Western-oriented philosopher. In his *Philosophical Letters* (written in 1829–1831) he argued that Russia had fallen behind the West and its historical role is still a question of the future. This claim sparked the controversy between the Western- and Slavophilic-oriented camps in Russian society.
2. See Mikhail Epshtein, *Priroda, mir, tainik vselennoi. Sistema peizazhnykh obrazov v russkoi poezii* [Nature, World, Mystery of the Universe. The System of Landscape Images in Russian Poetry], Moscow 1990.
3. Sjeng Scheijen, *Slaves of Literature. Literature Visual Art and Landscape Art*, in: *Russian Landscape*, ed. David Jackson, Groninger Museum, Schoten 2003, p. 89–102.
4. For the development of the image of the Russian landscape in literature and visual art see Kirill Pigarev, *Russkaia literatura i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo. Ocherki po russkom natsional'nom peizazhe sere diny XIX. veka* [Russian Literature and Visual Art. Studies in mid 19th-Century Russian National Landscape], Moscow 1972. See also the fundamental study by Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature. Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, DeKalb 2009.
5. Aleksei Venetsianov (1780–1847) is considered to be the first painter of Russian nature. It was he and his school who discovered the Russian rural landscape as a subject worthy of artistic representation. Tatiana Smirnova, *Venetsianov and his School*, Leningrad 1984.
6. All three critics were prominent authorities on 19th-century Russian art. Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906) was the most influential art critic of the second half of the 19th century and defender of the Peredvizhniki. Alexandre Benois, himself an artist, was connected with Mir Iskusstva – the World of Art group; he wrote the authoritative book *History of Russian Painting in the 19th century* (1902). Abram Efros (1888–1954) prolonged this tradition in his book *Two Centuries of Russian Art* (published 1969).
7. See Gleb Pospelov, *Introduction*, in: Dmitry Sarabyanov, *Russkaia zhivopis sredi evropeiskikh shkol* [Russian Painting among European Schools], Moscow 1980, p. 15.
8. Dmitry Sarabyanov, *Russkaia zhivopis XIX veka sredi evropeiskikh shkol*, Moscow 1982.
9. Dmitry Sarabyanov, *Rossia i zapad: istoriko-khudozhestvennye svyazi, XVIII-nachalo XX veka* [Russia-Europa arte e architettura], Moscow 2003 (see Italian edition, Milano 2003).
10. Gudrun Calov, *Russische Künstler in Deutschland*, Giessen 1979; Wend von Kalnein, *Der Einfluss Düsseldorfs auf die Malerei außerhalb Deutschlands*, in: *Die Düsseldorfer Malerschule*, ed. idem, Düsseldorf 1979, p. 197–208.
11. Bettina Baumgärtel, *Düsseldorfskaia shkola zhivopisi: nekotorye aspekty kul'turnogo vlianiia. Vzaimootnosheniia mezhdru russkimi i nemeckimi khudozhnikami* [The Düsseldorf School of Painting: Some Aspects of Cultural Influences. Relationships Between Russian and German Artists] in: *Garmonia i kontrapunkt. Rossia i Germania. XIX vek* [Harmony and Counterpoint. Russia and Germany. 19th Century], eds. Lyubov Savinskaia, Lyudmila Markina, Gosudarstvennyi muzei izobrazitelnykh iskusstv imeni A.S. Pushkina, Moscow 2003, p. 36–53.
12. Galina Čurak, *Russische Maler in Düsseldorf. Annäherungen und Parallelen*, in: *Die Düsseldorfer Malerschule und ihre internationale Ausstrahlung*, vol. 1: Essays, ed. Bettina Baumgärtel, Düsseldorf 2011, p. 218–231. The importance of the Düsseldorf School is also underlined by Rosalind Gray in her book *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford 2000.
13. Ely 2009, *This Meager nature*, p. 171.
14. Faina Maltseva, *Fedor Aleksandrovich Vasil'ev 1850–1873*, Moscow 1984, p. 57.
15. For the history of artistic education in Russia see the fundamental monographs by Nina Moleva and Ely Beliutin, *Russkaia khudozhevstvennaia shkola pervoi poloviny XIX veka* [The Russian Art School of the First Half of the 19th Century], Moscow 1963. *Russkaia khudozhevstvennaia shkola vtoro poloviny XIX-nachala XX veka* [Russian Art School of the Second Half of the 19th Century - Beginning of the 20th Century], Moscow 1967.
16. Ivan Shishkin, *Perepiska, dnevnik, sovremeniki o khudozhnike* [Letters, Diary, Contemporaries about the Artist], Leningrad 1978, p. 93.
17. When an artist was awarded a major gold medal he also automatically obtained the rank of officer (“chinovnik”) and could work in the Russian bureaucracy.
18. The painter Ilya Repin vividly described the circumstances of the competition. See Ilya Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe. Vospominaniia* [Far and Near. Memoires], Moscow 2002.
19. In 1863 the controversy surrounding this issue led to a protest by fourteen young painters. They left the Academy because they did not want to paint their final work on the topic of northern mythology chosen by the jury. Those fourteen artists established the Artel of Artists, some of whom later became members of the Peredvizhniki.
20. The year 1873 was an exception – five artists were awarded the major golden medal.
21. Grigori Sternin, *Khudozhevstvennaia zhizn Rossii sere diny XIX veka* [Artistic Life in Mid-19th Century Russia], Moscow 1991, p. 54. Calame's work played a role in the new trend in appreciation of the Russian landscape. Russian art critics pointed out that Calame reached the highest artistic standards while portraying his native landscape, and that Russian painters should follow his example by portraying Russia.
22. Rosalind P. Blakesley, *Promoting a Pan-European art. Aleksei Bogoliubov as artistic mediator between East and West*, in: *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Archi-*

- ecture, and the Decorative Arts, ed. Susan E. Reid and Rosalind P. Blakesley, DeKalb 2007, p. 21-44.
23. Andreas Achenbach was so popular in Russia that in 1861 he was elected an honorary member of the Imperial Academy of Arts. Čurak 2011, *Russische Maler in Düsseldorf*, p. 226.
 24. Ibid.
 25. This type of composition based on rhythmic changes of light and shadows was typical for the Düsseldorf School. Nevertheless, the origin of this formula can be found in 17th-century landscape painting.
 26. Savrasov visited Ukraine at the beginning of the 1850s. Since Gogol the Ukrainian landscape had been considered one of the most picturesque in the whole Russian Empire.
 27. Dutch landscape painting was particularly important for the Achenbach brothers. It was mediated to German artists by the art historian Karl Schnaase. His book *Niederländische Briefe* (1834) became a fundamental source for the understanding of Dutch art in Germany. German and Russian painters also copied the old Dutch masters as a part of their artistic education.
 28. Ely 2009, *This Meager Nature*, p. 102.
 29. Faina Mal'tseva, *Aleksei Kondrat'evich Savrasov. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo* [Aleksi Kondrat'evich Savrasov. Life and Work], Moscow 1977, p. 74.
 30. Calame represents a peculiar form of Calvinism, stating that God manifests himself through storms, avalanches and similar natural phenomena. See Valentina Anker, *Die Schweiz - Calame, Böcklin und die Düsseldorfer Malerschule*, in: *Die Düsseldorfer Malerschule und ihre internationale Ausstrahlung*, vol. 1: Essays, ed. Bettina Baumgärtel, Düsseldorf 2011, p. 235.
 31. Mal'tseva 1977, *Savrasov*, p. 80.
 32. Valentina Anker suggested that Calame worked out eleven different styles. Valentina Anker, *Alexandre Calame. Vie et Oeuvre*, Fribourg 1987.
 33. See Max Imdahl, *Baumstellung und Raumwirkung: zu verwandten Landschaftsbildern von Domenichino, Claude Lorrain und Jan Frans von Bloemen*, Köln 1958.
 34. Shishkin 1978, *Perepiska*, p. 69.
 35. Ibid., p. 245.
 36. Ibid., p. 248.
 37. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev pointed out in his book *The Russian Idea* that from the 1860s a rising tide of nationalism can be observed in Russian thought. See Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, New York 1948.
 38. We still know little about his life and work. The most exhaustive monograph remains the book by Adolf Frey, *Der Tiermaler Rudolf Koller*, Zurich 1928.
 39. Ekkehard Mai, *Zwischen Sinn und Sinnlichkeit. Düsseldorfs Beitrag zu Realismus und Idealismus in der Landschaftsmalerei*, in: *Landschaften von Andreas Achenbach bis Fritz von Wille*, ed. Idem, Petersberg 2011, p. 13.
 40. Ibid., p. 18.
 41. Shishkin 1978, *Perepiska*, p. 103.
 42. Shishkin's letter describing his changing relationship with Koller was first published in 1956. See Irina Pruzhan, *Dve rannye raboty I. I. Shishkina* [Two Early Works of I.I. Shishkin], in: *Soobsheniia Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeia*, vol. IV, 1956, p. 42-46.
 43. Shishkin 1978, *Perepiska*, p. 88.
 44. Ibid., p. 94.
 45. Johann Schirmer (1807-1863) is considered the inventor of the landscape depiction typical for the Düsseldorf school. His method of combining detailed study of nature with idealized compositional models was passed on to his pupils. Shishkin, although never a student of Schirmer's, nevertheless owed much to his methods. Baumgärtel 2003, *Düsseldorfskaia shkola*, p. 46.
 46. As Galina Čurak pointed out, it was in Düsseldorf that Shishkin learned the techniques of detailed observation in drawing plants, close to botanical illustration. Čurak 2011, *Russische Maler*, p. 228.
 47. Shishkin made four paintings during his stay.
 48. Ely 2009, *This Meager Nature*, p. 198-207.
 49. Rudolf Zeitler, *Die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1966, p. 124.
 50. Vischer argues that staffage divides the unity of the landscape painting by introducing human figures. This, he continues, causes the viewer to interpret not nature as the subject of the painting but the figures. "Im Landschaftsgemälde ist das eigentliche Subjekt die Natur, nicht der Mensch, tritt dieser mit dem Anspruch darin auf, dass wir uns für ihn interessieren, so hat das Gemälde zwei Subjekte, und die Einheit, d. h. das Kunstwerk, ist aufgehoben." Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Kritische Gänge*, vol. 5, München 1922, p. 45-47. Text quoted from Oskar Bätschmann, *Entfernung der Natur. Landschaftsmalerei 1750-1920*, Köln 1989, p. 314-317. See also Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen*, vol. 3, München 1923, p. 361-363.
 51. Zeitler 1966, *Die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, p. 124.
 52. Hermann Lotze, *Grundzüge der Ästhetik*, Berlin 1990, p. 55.
 53. Vischer 1922, *Kritische Gänge*, p. 315.

Picture credits

Fig. 1, 4 and 5: Moscow, The Sate Tretyakov Gallery

Fig. 2: Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum

Fig. 3: Museum Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur

Summary

Traveling was an important part of artistic education for many landscape painters in late imperial Russia, and the St Petersburg Academy of Arts devoted considerable funds for travel scholarships for its most excellent graduates. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the desired destination for foreign study for Russian landscape painters changed from Italy to the more artistically progressive places such as Düsseldorf and Geneva. From 1860 onwards many Russian landscape painters, including Ivan Shishkin and Aleksey Savrasov, studied with renowned painters like Alexandre Calame and Rudolf Koller in Switzerland, or with the Achenbach brothers in Düsseldorf. This paper will explore how two Russian artists – Shishkin and Savrasov – mastered the painting manner of Calame and the Düsseldorf School, and how they were able to reuse the visual strategies of Central European painting to express Russian nature.

Author

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Title

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