

## "The Russian Gérôme"? Vereshchagin as a Painter of Turkestan<sup>1</sup>

Maria Chernysheva

### Peer review and editing managed by:

Armen Kazaryan, State Institute of Art Studies, Moscow

### Reviewers:

Gleb Ershov, Tatiana Karpova

### Abstract

"The Russian Gérôme" – thus was Vereshchagin dubbed by English critics in 1872 and the comparison was repeatedly to be made by contemporaries. This article looks at where the two artists really do reveal similarities and at the deep-rooted differences in their presentation of the Orient, with an emphasis on Vereshchagin's first large work, his Turkestan series. Although Vereshchagin also took up oriental subjects later in his career, in this author's opinion the Turkestan series represents the most fruitful attempt to master the French model of orientalisating painting, above all that of Gérôme, not only in his own oeuvre but in Russian nineteenth-century art as a whole. As such, it provides us with ideal material to assess the individual and national features of Vereshchagin's orientalism.

### Contents

Introduction

Women, boys and severed heads in the orientalist paintings of Vereshchagin and Gérôme

Political aspects of Vereshchagin's Turkestan series

Critical reception of the Turkestan series. "Internal" Russian orientalism

Conclusion

### Introduction

[1] In 1864 Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin (1842-1904) left the St Petersburg Academy of Arts and set off for Paris, where he entered the painting studio of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. There he studied, on and off, for some three years. Vereshchagin was to maintain contact with Gérôme throughout his life. In the 1870s, when the Russian artist decided to settle in France and bought land at Maisons-Laffitte near Paris, Gérôme helped him build a large studio there, fitted out in accordance with the very latest standards.<sup>2</sup> Vereshchagin was to describe the French artist as "one of the greatest of contemporary painters"<sup>3</sup> and in the 1880s he continued to see himself as belonging to the school of Gérôme.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Catherine Phillips for translating my article into English and Dr. Laurie Dahlberg (Bard College, New York) for her advice and comments on the text. I am also most grateful to my reviewers Dr. Tatiana Karpova (State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) and Dr. Gleb Ershov (St Petersburg State University) as well as to Dr. Armen Kazaryan (State Institute of Art Studies, Moscow) for their help in publishing this article.

<sup>2</sup> Letters from Vereshchagin to Vladimir V. Stasov, 25 March 1875, 20 October 1875 and 27 November 1875, *Переписка В. В. Верещагина и В. В. Стасова* [The Correspondence of V. V. Vereshchagin and V. V. Stasov], 2 vols., Moscow 1950, vol. 1, 35, 49, 61. On the relationship between Gérôme and his other foreign student from St Petersburg Academy of Arts see: Agata Wójcik, "Jean-Léon Gérôme and Stanisław Chlebowski: The Story of a Friendship", in: *RIHA Journal* [27 December 2010], <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2010/wojcik-gerome-chlebowski-en> (accessed 30 March 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Vereshchagin to Stasov, 25 March 1875, *The Correspondence of V. V. Vereshchagin and V. V. Stasov*, vol. 1, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Vereshchagin to Stasov, 13 January 1880, *The Correspondence of V. V. Vereshchagin and V. V. Stasov*, vol. 2, 77.

[2] At the end of the 1890s when Gérôme was working on his bronze sculpture *Tamerlane* (1898; Private collection), he asked Vereshchagin to send him military accessories suitable to the historic period. Enclosed in a letter of 2 March 1897 Vereshchagin sent Gérôme photographs of a horse of the steppes. Six days later he confirmed that he had despatched costumes and weapons to Paris and asked that Gérôme return them when he had finished with them, suggesting that they were items he used in his own paintings. Vereshchagin explained the purpose of various accessories and shared his thoughts on what *Tamerlane* must have looked like.<sup>5</sup>

[3] This latter exchange brought the two artists together in the last years of their life, but it had its roots in an earlier period, when the Russian artist was just setting out as a painter of the Orient, strongly influenced by the work of his French teacher. It cannot be denied that Gérôme's interest in *Tamerlane*, a Central Asian ruler and military commander, owed something to the example of Vereshchagin, who dealt with the age of *Tamerlane* in a number of paintings in his *Turkestan* series, completed in 1874.<sup>6</sup> The *Turkestan* series was Vereshchagin's first large project, including paintings, studies and drawings. Although Vereshchagin also turned to oriental subjects later, in this author's opinion the *Turkestan* series represents the most fruitful attempt to master the French model of orientalising painting, above all that of Gérôme, not only in his own oeuvre but in Russian nineteenth-century art as a whole.

[4] When three of Vereshchagin's paintings from the *Turkestan* series – then still in progress – were first exhibited abroad in 1872, at the Russian art section of the *Second Annual International Exhibition* in London, English critics declared him to be "the Russian Gérôme" because of the two artists' common interest in depicting the Orient, including the darker, bloodier side of life.<sup>7</sup> Vereshchagin's contemporaries continued to make the link with Gérôme in later years.

[5] The Soviet literature on Vereshchagin mentions Gérôme merely in passing, as a skilled artist who "also" travelled in the East and painted orientalising pictures which include very precise ethnographical details.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in the eyes of Soviet writers, Vereshchagin and Gérôme belonged to two inimical camps, Realism and Academism. Despite the fact that Vereshchagin's work is of particular interest for its receptiveness to

---

<sup>5</sup> Gerald M. Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme: with a catalogue raisonné*, London and New York 1986, 150; Laurence Des Cars, Dominique de Font-Réaulx and Édouard Papet, *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme*, exh. cat., Paris 2010, 316.

<sup>6</sup> Stanislaw Chlebowski, a Polish student of Gérôme, also treated the image of *Tamerlane* in the 1870s.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: Vladimir V. Stasov, "Русская живопись и скульптура на лондонской выставке" [Russian Painting and Sculpture at the London Exhibition], in: *Избранные сочинения* [Selected Works], 3 vols., Moscow 1952, vol. 1, 221. Stasov cited the *Daily Telegraph* as his source.

<sup>8</sup> See Andrey K. Lebedev, *Василий Васильевич Верещагин: Жизнь и творчество 1842-1904* [Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin: Life and Work 1842-1904], Moscow 1972, 37-38. Lebedev was the main Soviet specialist in the works of Vereshchagin.

the latest tendencies of French academic painting, such writers were more prepared to ascribe Realist ideology to Gérôme than to admit that Vereshchagin's work had any element of academic painting. Clarifying and expanding on many aspects of Vereshchagin's life and work, Soviet art historians nonetheless remained largely faithful to the general interpretation laid out by Vladimir Vasilyevich Stasov,<sup>9</sup> particularly that great ideologist of Realism's understanding of what attracted Vereshchagin to Gérôme's studio. Putting himself in Vereshchagin's place, Stasov found in Gérôme's paintings not merely a passion for the Orient but

"a total lack of 'idealisation' and 'academicism' [...], a profound and indestructible realism in capturing and conveying life, a respect for the everyday in place of former bombast, an understanding of 'the little ending to life' [...], bitter accusation of the many terrible and cruel things that happen."<sup>10</sup>

[6] In essence, this is to judge Gérôme's work against the standard of Vereshchagin; thus in Stasov's reading it is not Vereshchagin who is the Russian Gérôme, but Gérôme who is the French Vereshchagin. Post-Soviet writings reveal a more complex understanding of the relationship between the art of the two men.<sup>11</sup> Although parallels between the works of Vereshchagin and Gérôme are mentioned in the modern literature<sup>12</sup>, no separate study on this subject has been published.

[7] Some of Vereshchagin's paintings in the Turkestan series echo Gérôme's orientalising works not only in subject but in compositional structure, specific iconographical motifs and the overall striking effect. But this only serves to underline the differences between how the Orient is depicted in the work of the Russian and the French artists. These differences are determined by three key factors.

[8] Firstly, Vereshchagin and Gérôme showed different parts of the Orient and their experience of Eastern lands was gained under very different conditions. Gérôme travelled peacefully through the Mediterranean regions, above all northern Egypt and Asia Minor. By the middle of the nineteenth century this area had been considerably more affected

---

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906) was Russia's leading art and music critic in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was an admirer of Realism and of Vereshchagin in particular. Towards the end of his life he was an energetic opponent of Alexandre Benois (1870-1960), who might be described as one of the first defenders of Modernism in Russia. Not without some foundation, Benois accused Stasov of demanding only that art be moralising and of being insensitive to its artistic qualities.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir V. Stasov, "Василий Васильевич Верещагин" [Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin], in: *Selected Works*, vol. 2, 228.

<sup>11</sup> Alexey Bobrikov, *Другая история русского искусства* [A Different History of Russian Art], Moscow 2012, 363-364. Bobrikov writes: "Gérôme was the most important European artist for new Russian art, for the traditions of both Vereshchagin and Siemiradzki", here 363.

<sup>12</sup> Louise J. Shalev, *Vasilii Vereshchagin (1842-1904): Orientalism and Colonialism in the Work of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Artist*, Master's thesis, San Jose State University 1993, 110, 116, 118-120; Tatiana Mojenok, *Les peintres réalistes russes en France (1860-1900)*, Paris 2003, 163-164; David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Vasilij V. Vereshchagin's Canvases of Central Asian Conquest", in: *Cahiers d'Asie central* 17/18 (2009), <http://asiecentrale.revues.org/1196> (accessed 15 Sept 2014).

by contact with Europe than had Turkestan,<sup>13</sup> which Vereshchagin visited in 1867-1868 and 1869-1870, during the Russian campaigns to control the Central Asian khanates. The Russian took part in the bloody war there not simply as a painter but as a soldier. For as the son of a noble family, Vereshchagin had initially studied with the Naval Cadet Corps in St Petersburg at his parents' wish, graduating in 1860. He then rejected a military career in favour of painting, but returned to the army for his travels to Turkestan, serving as a warrant officer under the first Governor-General of Turkestan, Konstantin von Kaufman. Fighting on the front line, Vereshchagin was wounded and received the Cross of the Order of St George IV Class for his role in the defence of the Samarkand Fortress against the troops of the Emir of Bukhara in summer 1868.

[9] Secondly, Vereshchagin and Gérôme had been brought up in different lands, with different national perceptions of the Orient. From Russia, semi-Asiatic in both geography and culture, the view of the East was very different to the view from France.

[10] Thirdly, unlike Gérôme, an artist of the academic school, Vereshchagin was driven by Realist ideology. He was thus less bound by the existing artistic tradition, less bound by artistic rules, and sought for greater faithfulness to his own impressions of what he saw, whilst also paying considerable attention to social and political realities in the East. The result was that Vereshchagin's paintings of the Orient were less timeless, more relevant, than those of Gérôme.

[<top>](#)

### **Women, boys and severed heads in the orientalist paintings of Vereshchagin and Gérôme**

[11] In Gérôme's paintings oriental types and exotic props featured as themselves, as elements of everyday scenes, but they also exemplified three central and intersecting themes: luxury, calm and sensuality; devout religiosity; despotism and cruelty. The erotic subtext is quite pronounced, in keeping with the wider orientalist trend, with depictions of harems and bath-houses popular not only in painting but throughout nineteenth-century European orientalisating literature.<sup>14</sup>

[12] In many ways, Vereshchagin's Turkestan series accords with the structure of Gérôme's orientalisating works. Its component paintings can be divided into the everyday,

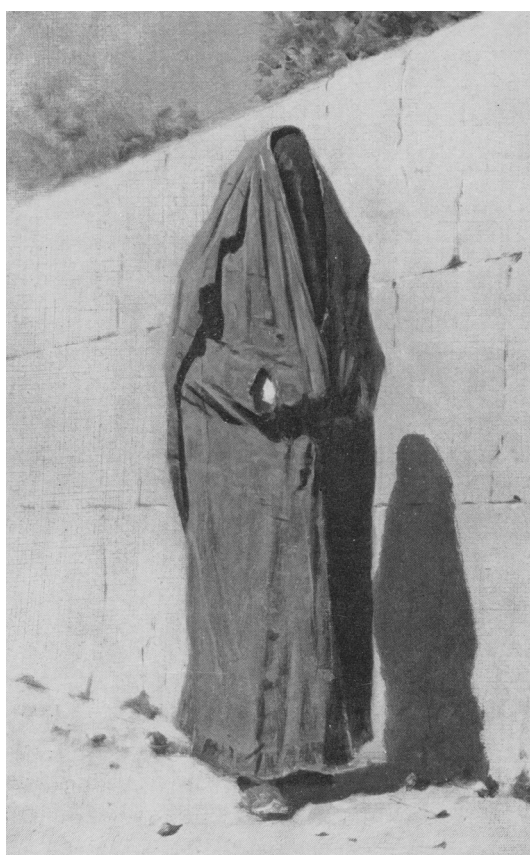
---

<sup>13</sup> Turkestan or Western Turkestan are names (no longer used) for a region in Central Asia that now encompasses Uzbekistan, Turkmenia, Kirghizia, Tadjikistan and Kazakhstan. Samarkand, now in Uzbekistan, was the capital of the empire of Tamerlane (1336-1405). In 1867 Turkestan was absorbed into the Russian Empire and became the Turkestan Governorate-General. On Russian Turkestan see: Sergey Abashin and Svetlana Gorshenina, eds., *Le Turkestan russe: une colonie comme les autres?*, Tashkent and Paris 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Mary A. Stevens, "Western Art and its Encounter with the Islamic World 1798-1914", in: Mary A. Stevens, ed., *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse. European Painters in North Africa and the Near East*, exh. cat., London 1984, 18; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York 1994, 121. On the importance and nature of the erotic theme in nineteenth-century French Orientalising painting see: Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient", in: Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, New York 1989, 41-45.

those depicting despotism and cruelty, those showing Islamic religiosity and lastly those dealing with the oriental sensuality that was closed to Europeans. Nonetheless, the battle paintings which occupy such an important place in Vereshchagin's Turkestan series are not typical of Gérôme's work, although they frequently appear in French orientalist painting overall.

[13] Women feature only infrequently in Vereshchagin's paintings and are never shown naked. *Uzbek Woman in Tashkent* (Fig. 1), a study from the Turkestan series, shows a female figure fully covered in black robes, even her eyes hidden, the only hint that there is a living, breathing body behind all the cloth being the tiny bit of flesh accidentally revealed at the wrist. What a contrast with the lustrous skin of Gérôme's women!



1 Vasily Vereshchagin, *Uzbek Woman in Tashkent*, 1873, oil on canvas, 36 x 26 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Reprod. from: Andrey K. Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, Moscow 1972, 106)

[14] Vereshchagin's picture of the East in his Turkestan series shows it as a masculine world, in which the object of desire is the handsome boy or *batcheh* (*batcha*). Even in nineteenth-century French painting, otherwise so suffused with sensual libertinage, the subject of oriental homo-eroticism, with its shades of pedophilia, was a dangerous one. Yet more surprising was the appearance of this theme in the work of a Russian artist. It remained unique in Vereshchagin's own oeuvre, the extreme chastity of which set it far apart from that of Gérôme. Whilst not totally accepting Soviet art history's praise of



Vereshchagin as a critical "activist", opposing the sexual objectivisation of the childish body, there is certainly an element of distance and a lack of sensual involvement on the part of the artist that sets him apart from his French counterparts.

[15] Vereshchagin made specific reference to the Asiatic *bacheh* in a long passage in his travel notes:

"[T]he extremely oppressed status of women is the main reason for the abnormal phenomenon found here, of the 'bacheh'. The literal translation of 'bacheh' is boy; but since these boys play a strange, or rather I would say not entirely normal role, the word 'bacheh' has another meaning that I would be uncomfortable explaining.

"It is usually pretty boys, starting from about eight years old, sometimes a little older, who become bacheh dancers. The child passes from the hands of parents indifferent to how they come by money into the hands of one, two, sometimes many admirers of beauty, who might perhaps be speculators, and they, with the aid of older boys whose career as dancers and singers are over, teach the art to their young charge, and when he is trained they cosset and dress him like a doll, pamper and care for him, and rent him out for money for the evening to all who wish and for public performances.

"I have seen such public performances, the tamasha, many times."<sup>15</sup>

[16] The restrained tone of description in Vereshchagin's text and his negative attitude – quite clearly expressed in his use of the phrase "abnormal phenomenon" – can be contrasted with Gustave Flaubert's impressions of dancing boys in Egypt a few years before. Flaubert, despite his claims not to be aroused by the spectacle, nonetheless demonstrates a kind of sensual reaction:

"We have not yet seen any dancing girls. They have all been exiled to upper Egypt [...]. But we have seen dancing boys. Ah! Ah! Ah! [...] For the dancers, picture two scamps who are passably ugly but charming in the deliberate corruption and depravity of their feminine movements and gaze, being dressed as girls with antimony-painted eyes [...]. When their hips move, the entire rest of their body remains motionless. When, in contrast, their chest moves, nothing else budes. They advance towards you, arms extended and playing copper rattles, while their faces, beneath all the sweat and make-up, remain as inexpressive as statues [...]. The solemnity of the face in contrast to the lewd movements of the body creates quite an effect [...]. It is too beautiful to be arousing, I doubt that the women are as good as the men."<sup>16</sup>

[17] In *Batcha and his Worshipers* (Fig. 2) Vereshchagin depicted what he had suggested in his notes was not a widely accessible part of the performance, the "treating" of the *bacheh*, to which the Russian artist had been invited as an honoured guest. Sitting proudly and importantly by the wall is the *bacheh* himself, dressed up "like a doll", surrounded by admirers of different ages and complexion who, "elbows resting on their

---

<sup>15</sup> Vasily V. Vereshchagin, "Из путешествия по Средней Азии" [From a Journey Through Central Asia], in: *Очерки, наброски, воспоминания. С рисунками* [Essays, Sketches, Reminiscences. With Drawings], St Petersburg 1883, 52-53.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Gustave Flaubert to Louis Bouilhet, 15 January 1850, *Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert*, Paris 1973, vol. 1, 571-572. Translated by and quoted in: Des Cars, de Font-Réaulx and Papet, *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 278.

knees, perhaps bent over, look ingratiatingly at the *batcheh*; they follow his every move, catch his eye, harken unto his every word."<sup>17</sup>



2 Vasily Vereshchagin, *Batcha and his Worshippers*, 1868 (Nineteenth-century photograph. The original painting was destroyed by the artist. Reprod. from: Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, 71)



3 Vasily Vereshchagin, *The Sale of the Slave-Child*, 1872, oil on canvas, 123 x 92.4 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Reprod. from: Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, 105)

[18] We know this painting only from reproductions, since Vereshchagin destroyed it himself after Kaufman – who did much to promote his work – declared it indecent.<sup>18</sup> But Stasov was probably correct when he asserted that "Before Vereshchagin [...] nobody in

<sup>17</sup> Vereshchagin, "From a Journey Through Central Asia", 56.

<sup>18</sup> Stasov, "Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin", 235. Vereshchagin presumably hoped that by pleasing Kaufman he would facilitate the sale of the Turkestan series to the state, although that never came about.

Europe had ever taken up this subject in painting."<sup>19</sup> Greater similarities can be found between the paintings of Gérôme and Vereshchagin when we compare the former's later painting, *The Serpent Charmer* (1880; The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown), with another piece from Vereshchagin's Turkestan series, *The Sale of the Slave-Child* (Fig. 3). Vereshchagin had visited the slave market in Central Asia, where Russian laws and Russian administration had not yet been fully imposed,<sup>20</sup> and he wrote this description:

"The buildings for this trade [...] are arranged like a caravansarai, only they are divided into a larger number of small cages, each with a separate door; if there is a large courtyard then in the middle is an awning to shade pack animals; most of the people for sale are here, the least reliable of them tied to the wooden supports of the awning. There are all kinds of people bustling around in such places: some of them buying, others just looking.

"The buyer asks the *goods* what he can do, what crafts he knows and such like. Then he takes him into a small room and under the watchful eyes of the owner looks to see if there are any physical defects or illnesses. Young women do not tend to be put on display in the yard but are looked over in the rooms, and they are checked over not by the buyer himself but by experienced elderly female healers [...].

"Overall there are more males on sale than females [...]. A beautiful young woman will cost a lot of money, up to 1000 roubles or even more.

"Pretty little boys also cost a pretty penny: there is huge demand for them across the whole of Central Asia."<sup>21</sup>

[19] Gérôme's pictures showed female slaves at oriental markets naked, displayed to all in the courtyards, looked over from teeth to toes by the male buyers. But although there were slaves in Egypt, it seems unlikely that Gérôme in fact ever saw a slave market<sup>22</sup> (unlike Vereshchagin), let alone oriental ladies bathing, and even more unlikely that those markets looked as they do in his pictures. Which did not prevent Gérôme's compatriots from thinking that works such as *The Slave Market (For Sale)* (1866; The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown) were painted from the life, an opinion expressed by the photographer and experienced traveller Maxime du Camp.<sup>23</sup>

[20] In *The Sale of the Slave-Child* Vereshchagin shows a boy of about eight – the age from which boys were taken to become *bacheh* – standing close up before an old, grey-bearded man seated in front of a wall, wearing a turban and rich attire. The boy's robe lies on the ground at his feet and his arms are spread out to the sides to allow the buyer

---

<sup>19</sup> Stasov, "Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin", 242.

<sup>20</sup> It should be recalled that in Russian itself serfdom – in effect the slavery of the peasantry – had been abolished only very recently, in 1861.

<sup>21</sup> Vereshchagin, "From a Journey Through Central Asia", 49, 51. Italics in the original.

<sup>22</sup> Des Cars, de Font-Réaulx and Papet, *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> Maxime Du Camp, "Le Salon de 1867", in: *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. 69 (1867), 674.



to look over his naked body, all the while fingering his prayer beads and assessing whether or not the price is right.

[21] Apart from the general nature of the subject, i.e. the concentration of attention on a naked child, there are some similarities between Gérôme's *The Serpent Charmer* and Vereshchagin's *The Sale of the Slave-Child* in the character types and the arrangement of the figures, with the main protagonists placed opposite each other and the young boy seen from behind. But Vereshchagin's *The Sale of the Slave-Child*, like his *Batcha and his Worshippers*, is far less erotic in intent and effect than Gérôme's *Serpent Charmer*. Unlike Gérôme, Vereshchagin is not exhibiting the naked child to the painting's viewer: he is depicting how that nakedness is exhibited to slave buyers, to the viewer within the painting. In Vereshchagin's painting the boy is further from the painting's viewer than from the painted viewer, the precise opposite to the situation in Gérôme's picture. Vereshchagin's boy is lit from the side of the painted viewer, as if for the older man's purposes, whereas Gérôme's boy is lit from the side of the real viewer, i.e. for the real viewer's delectation. The child's nakedness in Vereshchagin's painting seems naïve and touching, but Gérôme's boy is aware, his nakedness an instrument of power. For Vereshchagin that nakedness was but one of many elements in the painting, whereas for Gérôme it was the main subject.

[22] Overall Vereshchagin's Turkestan works are less pictorial – in the sense of a deliberate construction of a complex composition, containing allusions to themes and images from the European artistic tradition – than the oriental images created by Gérôme. Many works in the series are essentially studies made on the spot, while others, apparently more developed, nonetheless preserve the compositional simplicity of a study. Stasov asserted that Vereshchagin "paints everything from life, down to the tiniest detail" and was proud that "he had never made a single copy" of any existing artistic images.<sup>24</sup> We should not entirely accept this statement, however. Several works in the Turkestan series do begin to take on the affected qualities of a "picture" and it is in these works that we see most strongly the influence of artistic models, i.e. the works of Gérôme.

[23] An example of this is one of the best known pieces from the Turkestan series, *Presenting the Trophies* (Fig. 4). It seems evident to this author that Vereshchagin was here influenced by Gérôme's *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn* (Fig. 5), in which two warriors stand guard at the entrance to the 13th-century El Assaneyn Mosque in Cairo, with a pile of severed human heads between them on the steps and several suspended above. *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn* was shown at the Salon of 1866, whilst Vereshchagin was in Paris. Indeed, he himself exhibited there two of his large drawings of motifs from recent trips through the Caucasus.

---

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir V. Stasov, "Мастерская Vereshchagina" [Vereshchagin's Studio], *Selected Works*, vol. 1, 335; Stasov, "Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin", 224.



4 Vasily Vereshchagin, *Presenting the Trophies*, 1872, oil on canvas, 171.5 x 240.8 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Reprod. from: Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, 125)



5 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn*, 1866, oil on panel, 53.8 x 43.7 cm (Photograph by Goupil & Cie, 1866-1867. The painting is now in the Orientalist Museum, Doha)

[24] Gérôme's painting attracted considerable public attention and was much commented on in the press. Photographic reproductions were produced and made available almost immediately by the firm of Adolphe Goupil. Stasov was later to admire the work in his review of "Contemporary Art in Europe."<sup>25</sup> There can be no doubt that Vereshchagin was, at the very least, aware of the painting.

<sup>25</sup> Vladimir V. Stasov, "Нынешнее искусство в Европе" [Contemporary Art in Europe], *Selected Works*, vol. 1, 561.

[25] Although we do not know what particular event (if any) inspired Gérôme's work, some critics saw the painting as extremely true to life. This time, however, Du Camp was critical, seeing in the painting a very clear departure from reality:

"In the Orient, severed heads that are exhibited are not hung by the hair, nor are they dumped pell-mell on the steps of a stairway; they are impaled on iron pikes above a doorway or a wall."<sup>26</sup>

[26] It is precisely thus that Vereshchagin showed the severed heads in *Rejoicing* (1872; State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) in the Turkestan series: here the heads of Russian soldiers are exhibited on tall pikes or poles on the Registan in Samarkand, before the 17th-century Sher-Dor Madrasah, as the people listen to a mullah's homily. Vereshchagin himself never witnessed such a scene personally but he had been in Samarkand and, unlike Gérôme, he did see the troops of the Emir of Bukhara beheading captured Russians and carrying the heads away as trophies during the defence of Samarkand Fortress. Indeed, he himself ran the risk of suffering the same fate, for at one point the Russian garrison in Samarkand Fortress was but a hair's breadth from disaster. Vereshchagin recalled:

"How awful were the bodies of those several soldiers [...] whose heads [...] were cut deeply out from their shoulders [...]. It is known that a reward is made for each head of a dead enemy, mainly in the form of clothing, and this is the case not only in Central Asia."<sup>27</sup>

[27] In addition to his own experience, Vereshchagin could also rely on information provided by other trusted sources. There were people who had witnessed the traditional public executions – including the display of severed heads – that had taken place only a short time before he himself arrived in the region. One such trusted source, knowledgeable in matters of the Orient, may have been his friend General Alexander Geyns, a participant in the Turkestan campaign. Geyns contributed to the catalogue of Vereshchagin's *Turkestan exhibition* in St Petersburg in 1874, noting that:

"the heads of Russians who fell during the storm of Tashkent were sent to Kokand and there exhibited on pikes before the palace. Then the heads were sent on to Kashgaria to be shown to the ruler there, Yaqub Beg."<sup>28</sup>

[28] Looking at *Presenting the Trophies*, we might think at first glance that Vereshchagin is presenting the severed heads just as Gérôme had depicted them in *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn* six years earlier. But although they are tossed in a heap, they are not placed incongruously on the steps leading into a mosque: the heap in Vereshchagin's painting is piled on a dais in the internal courtyard of

---

<sup>26</sup> Maxime Du Camp, "Le Salon de 1866", in: *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. 63 (1866), 703. Translated by and quoted in: Des Cars, de Font-Réaulx and Papet, *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 242.

<sup>27</sup> Vasily V. Vereshchagin, *На войне в Азии и Европе* [At War in Asia and Europe], Moscow 1894, 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Каталог картин, этюдом и рисункам В.В. Верещагина* [Catalogue of Paintings, Studies and Drawings of V. V. Vereshchagin], St Petersburg 1874, 70.

Tamerlane's palace in Samarkand, for display to the ruler, in keeping with the practices as they were described in eyewitness reports. Moreover Vereshchagin, hero of the defence of Samarkand Fortress, was familiar with the city's historic architectural monuments, including the palace; he shows not the medieval era, not some abstract and unidentified time or event, but the recent past, when the palace was in the hands of the Emir of Bukhara. It is to the Emir – a real and recent enemy – that these ghastly trophies, the Russian heads, are presented.

[29] While both *Presenting the Trophies* and *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn* are vertical in format, Vereshchagin's work is considerably larger than that of Gérôme. There is some similarity between the mosque interior seen through the doorway in Gérôme's painting, filled with light and with its rhythmic rows of columns, and the brightly lit space with a colonnade in that of Vereshchagin. But Vereshchagin seems to transform the middle ground of Gérôme's composition, to turn it into Tamerlane's palace, enlarging it to fill the whole of his picture space and transferring the scene round a pile of severed heads into a new – and more fitting – context.

[30] The influence of Gérôme's painting is even more evident in two other well-known works by Vereshchagin: *The Doors of Tamerlane* (Fig. 6) and *At the Doors of a Mosque* (Fig. 7). Both of these large canvases were declared masterpieces by both Russian and foreign critics. Neither shows severed heads but both repeat the compositional scheme of Gérôme's *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn*, with wooden doors at the centre set close up to the picture plane, ornamented with fine carving which forms the key ethnographical motif, and with figures flanking the doors. In *The Doors of Tamerlane* the figures are guards, as in Gérôme's painting, but Vereshchagin's door is the entrance into Tamerlane's palace, guarded by soldiers whose clothes and weapons are of a bygone age. In the second painting the figures are beggars or dervishes, the poses of whom are similar to those of Gérôme's guards, only in reverse. They flank the doors of a mosque as do Gérôme's guards, but this is the mosque in the mausoleum of the Muslim poet and preacher Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, built by Tamerlane in the town of Turkestan (in what is now southern Kazakhstan).

[31] For all these similarities, Vereshchagin's *The Doors of Tamerlane* and *At the Doors of a Mosque* are more complex in conception than *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn*. Despite the difference in format they should be seen as forming a conceptual pair. They are similar in composition and contain common elements – such as architecture of the age of Tamerlane – which are deliberately used to emphasise the contrast between the Orient of the past and present: one shows the majestic, untouchable Orient of Tamerlane, the other the impoverished, weak and all too accessible modern Orient, with beggars picking their fleas by crumbling walls. Vereshchagin presents the pitiless will or



irony of history that has brought a once-flourishing and powerful culture to a state of degradation.



6 Vasily Vereshchagin, *The Doors of Tamerlane*, 1872, oil on canvas, 213 x 168 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Reprod. from: Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, 95)



7 Vasily Vereshchagin, *At the Doors of a Mosque*, 1873, oil on canvas, 315 x 237 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg (Reprod. from: Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, 97)

[<top>](#)



### Political aspects of Vereshchagin's Turkestan series

[32] When Vereshchagin showed his Turkestan series at the Crystal Palace in London in 1873 – at his very first one-man show – he chose to accentuate the view of the Orient that was familiar to Europeans, the view that was reflected in French orientalisng painting and which, moreover, had a keen political relevance. This is the view of the western colonial imperialist dominating the East, presented as an alien, savage, wild world.<sup>29</sup> Bringing together *Rejoicing* and *Presenting the Trophies* and four other paintings, Vereshchagin grouped them within the series under the title *Barbarians*. The culmination of the group was the most famous painting of all in the series, *The Apotheosis of War* (1871; State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), presenting a pyramid of skulls in the desert, on the periphery of which we see withered trees and destroyed buildings, pitiful traces of a former life. Originally entitled *Tamerlane's Victory*, under its new title the painting gained a more resonant and all-encompassing meaning.

[33] A close study was made of the great medieval Asiatic conqueror and ruler Tamerlane (Timur) in the middle of the nineteenth century by a leading Russian medieval historian, Timofey Granovsky, professor of Moscow University and supporter of the Westernising trend in Russian society. In a public lecture first published in 1852 he cited the reports of European envoys to Tamerlane's court describing the ruler's cruelty:

"The envoys did not find Tamerlane in Asia Minor and had to travel to him in his capital, Samarkand. The lands through which their path lay still bore fresh marks of recent devastation. Clavigo saw many pyramids of human heads, evidence of Tamerlane's victorious passage [...]."<sup>30</sup>

[34] In the catalogue of his London exhibition of 1873 Vereshchagin explained of *The Apotheosis of War*:

"This picture is historically true; Timour, who drenched the whole of Asia and part of Europe with blood (now the great saint of all the Mahommedans of Central Asia), erected everywhere such monuments of his greatness."<sup>31</sup>

[35] Vereshchagin went on to describe various barbarian habits of the Central Asian peoples. Of Kalmyks he wrote:

---

<sup>29</sup> The imperialistic connotations of the Turkestan series are analysed in detail in: Natasha Medvedev, *The Contradictions in Vereshchagin's Turkestan Series: Visualizing the Russian Empire and its Others*, Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles 2009. See also: Daniel Brower, "Images of the Orient: Vasily Vereschagin and Russian Turkestan", in: *Working Paper*, Berkeley 1993; Shalev, *Vasilii Vereshchagin*, 91-99; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Vasilij V. Vereshchagin's Canvases of Central Asian Conquest"; Bobrikov, *A Different History of Russian Art*, 367-369.

<sup>30</sup> Timofey N. Granovsky, *Четыре исторические характеристики* [Four Historical Characterisations], St Petersburg 1908, 10.

<sup>31</sup> *Sketches of Central Asia*, by M. Basil Wereschagin. Exhibited in the Loan Gallery at Crystal Palace, London 1873, 5.

"Ugly, with strongly-marked Mongol features and low squat figures, superstitious, naïve, gluttons, dirty, addicted to tobacco, opium, spirits and stealing – such are the Kalmucks."<sup>32</sup>

[36] His political purpose in stressing "Asiatic barbarity" is revealed quite clearly in his short introduction:

"The barbarism of the people of Central Asia is so glaring, their economical and social condition so degraded, that the sooner European civilization penetrates into that country, from the one side or the other, the better."<sup>33</sup>

[37] Of course in referring to "one side or the other", Vereshchagin had in mind "the Great Game", the opposing attempts of the Russians and British to master Central Asia, but he seemed to be encouraging the British to unite forces with Russia with the specific purpose of bringing European civilisation to the Orient. He continued:

"If these faithful sketches will assist in dispelling the distrust of the English public towards their natural friends and neighbours in Central Asia, the labour of travel and exhibition will be more than compensated."<sup>34</sup>

[38] The British Empire was concerned by Russia's active advances into Central Asia, seeing a threat to their own dominance in India. In 1873 yet another tense stage in Russo-British negotiations regarding the division of spheres of influence in Central Asia, and most particularly regarding the borders of Afghanistan, was drawing to a close. Russia enlisted the support of Austria and Germany in an attempt to achieve more favourable terms. It can hardly have been a matter of chance that the series of exhibitions of Vereshchagin's Turkestan works was held at just this critical point in Russia's manoeuvring on the Central Asian question. Three paintings from the series were shown in 1872 in the Russian section of the *Second Annual International Exhibition* in London, then more featured in the one-man show in the Crystal Palace in 1873. Through the efforts of General Kaufman the 1873 exhibition was supported by the Russian government in terms of both organisation and finance. That same year photographs of the paintings in the series then in London were featured at the *World Exhibition* in Vienna, amongst the products of the celebrated Munich photographer Johann Baptist Obernetter: the issue of these photographs was again financed by the Russian state.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Sketches of Central Asia*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Sketches of Central Asia*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Sketches of Central Asia*, 2. Vereshchagin's catalogue was translated into English by the linguist and traveller Edward Delmar Morgan, a member of the Royal Geographical Society. Vereshchagin and Morgan were friends and exchanged letters. Morgan also translated the texts of celebrated Russian explorer and scholar Nikolay Mikhailovich Przhevalsky, one of the most radical supporters of Russia's colonial policy in Central Asia. In his *History of Russian Painting*, first published in 1902, Alexandre Benois compared Vereshchagin with Przhevalsky: "Vereshchagin is of great importance as researcher, scholar, ethnographer, traveller and reporter. But just as one cannot call Livingstone or Przhevalsky poets, despite the great precision of their descriptions, so Vereshchagin cannot be called a true artist because he spied out, with great difficulty and persistence, at all latitudes, more verisimilitudinous details than his predecessors" (Alexandre Benois, *История русской живописи в XIX веке* [The History of Russian Painting in the Nineteenth Century], Moscow 1999, 287).

[39] From both the British and Russian points of view, one of the most convincing arguments that could be put forward in favour of their presence in Central Asia was an insistence on the barbarity of the local peoples and the need for the introduction of civilisation, the mission to civilise being one of the proclaimed purposes of all European colonisers. Phrases from the introduction to Vereshchagin's London catalogue echo the rhetoric of Russian and British diplomacy on Central Asia, then being so actively discussed in the press, thereby uniting Russia and Britain in a common imperial superciliousness towards non-European peoples.

[40] Though the *Turkestan* series was quite strikingly used by the Russian government for its own imperialist propaganda, with Vereshchagin's agreement, tacit or otherwise, we cannot ignore the fact that many of the images in the series not only do not accord with the purposes of such propaganda but even contradict them. This was certainly strikingly evident to Vereshchagin's compatriots, above all to the command of the Russian army, when the *Turkestan exhibition* moved to St Petersburg in spring 1874.

[41] Either the Russian generals had not bothered to look at the works that Vereshchagin exhibited in London or they had missed one of their main features, a feature that now gave rise to some concern in the artist's homeland: the *Turkestan* pictures demonstrated that the Russian army was suffering serious losses and that it enjoyed no more victories than did their Central Asian.

[42] The director of the Asiatic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pyotr Nikolaevich Stremoukhov said to Vereshchagin that "just as Horace Vernet [...] glorified the French army so [did Vereshchagin] humiliate and vilify the Russian."<sup>35</sup>

[43] In 1874 Vereshchagin's request for permission to resign from the military, which he had submitted back in late 1873, was granted.

[44] Stremoukhov was wrong in accusing Vereshchagin of vilifying the Russian army but he was certainly right to contrast him with Vernet, for Vereshchagin did not always observe the accepted formalities of the colonial imperialist portrayal of the Orient which demanded that the enemy be belittled, being that of the conqueror over the conquered, based on a presumption of the West's domination of the East, both cultural and military. Although French orientalist paintings rarely included Europeans,<sup>36</sup> Vernet – predecessor of Gérôme and Vereshchagin – frequently depicted them doing battle with Muslims, always demonstrating the unquestioned superiority of the former over the latter.

[45] In addition to *Rejoicing* and *Presenting the Trophies*, the *Turkestan* series included another painting with a depiction of a severed Russian head, *After the Victory* (1868; State Russian Museum, St Petersburg). This is one of the three earliest works in the

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in: Fyodor I. Bulgakov, *В. В. Верещагин и его произведения* [V. V. Vereshchagin and his Works], St Petersburg 1905, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient", 36-37.

series, shown in the Russian section of the *Second Annual International Exhibition* in London of 1872, when Vereshchagin gained that nickname, "the Russian Gérôme".

Stasov wrote:

"The Victory shows two Central Asians lifting the severed head of a Russian enemy by the hair; they look upon it as if upon a pearl, a multicoloured diamond, of which they should boast and with which to adorn themselves."<sup>37</sup>

[46] We should look closely at this motif, the severed head, which features throughout the Turkestan series. Gérôme's *Heads of the Rebel Beys at the Mosque El Assaneyn* and Henri Regnault's *Execution Without Hearing Under the Moorish Kings* (1870; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which both caused a sensation in Europe, showed the severed heads of Muslims, not contemporary Europeans. The rumours that Gérôme gave the slaughtered Beys the features of his most hated art critics do not negate the fact that the heads are oriental, both as defined in the title and as they appear in facial type. Vereshchagin, by contrast, showed severed Russian heads in the hands and beneath the feet of Central Asians, yet Russia represented the European side in the Turkestan wars! Whether deliberately or not, this was a keen and specific indication that while the East may be lagging behind the West, a barbarian and uncivilized place, it was still not totally subordinate, outdoing the West in its coarse primordial strength. The East is, in Vereshchagin's work, still a real and current threat.

[<top>](#)

### **Critical reception of the Turkestan series. "Internal" Russian orientalism**

[47] Foreign critics writing about the paintings that Vereshchagin exhibited at the *Second Annual International Exhibition* in London in 1872 and at his one-man shows in London in 1873, in 1879 in Paris and in 1880 in Vienna, all noted the Asiatic aspect of the Turkestan series, recognising that it not only lay in the subject but that it coloured the artist's own view. For some this was a merit, for others a great defect. Just three examples can serve to represent the abundance of possible quotations.

[48] A critic writing in the London *Saturday Review* on April 26, 1873 noted:

"Vereshchagin's savage force is neither French nor Bavarian: it is half-barbarian and Russian."<sup>38</sup>

[49] In Vienna, the *Morgenpost* praised Vereshchagin:

"he has [...] his own unique kind of Asiatic freshness; a sort of uncivilised primordiality, as different as night is from day from his somewhat smooth and sleek teacher [i.e. Gérôme – MC]."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Stasov, "Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin", 242.

<sup>38</sup> This quotation is a back translation from the Russian quoted in: Stasov, "Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin", 238.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in: Vladimir V. Stasov, "Венская печать о Верещагине" [The Hungarian Press on Vereshchagin], *Selected Works*, vol. 2, 109. Stasov cites the *Morgenpost* for 3 November 1880.

[50] Amongst the many admiring reviews in the Paris press of Vereshchagin's exhibition in 1879 there were also those more critical. The *Télégraphe* was ironic:

"This Russian has outbursts worthy of Courbet [...]. However much one applied the varnish of Gérôme and our school, he would still remain a Kalmyk [...]."<sup>40</sup>

[51] In using the word "Kalmyk" the critic of the *Télégraphe* meant someone of Asiatic type in general but also the radical Realist artist, the "barbarian" artist, who made no concessions to noble European painting culture.

[52] From these reviews it seems that Western Europeans saw in the Turkestan series a view of the East from the East, that they perceived it as a sort of self-observation or self-representation. Whilst such a perception is one-sided and simplistic it is not without an element of truth.

[53] The ways in which the Turkestan series differs from the French Orientalist painting tradition, set out above, result from the fact that Vereshchagin showed the East not only from the Western point of view, as the West was used to seeing it – and wished to see it. This was due not so much to Vereschagin's own individual approach as to the nature of Russian orientalism itself. For Russia – in contrast to European lands – the East was not something external and alien or "other", but something internal and part of Russia itself. There was the fundamental difference of geography of course – Russia's eastern colonies lay contiguous to the Empire's main lands, not separated by sea as were French colonies from France and British colonies from Britain.<sup>41</sup> But just as important was the very nature of Russia's culture, which had a deep-rooted oriental component. It was this that made possible the implicit, if not explicit, presence of oriental self-awareness in Russian orientalism. This phenomenon might be described as "internal" Russian orientalism.<sup>42</sup>

[54] From the middle of the nineteenth century Russian society and official policy-makers were divided by the question of Russian identity, torn between East and West. "Westernisers" wanted Russia to take a path that would be closer to that followed by Western Europe, while the "Slavophiles" wished to see an alternative, uniquely "Slavic" path. Nonetheless, both groups recognised that Russian culture was firmly underpinned by Western and oriental fundamentals. The Western elements were associated mainly with the reforms of Peter the Great and his Europeanisation of Russia, while the nature of the oriental underpinning was a matter of some disagreement, being seen variously as

---

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in: Vladimir V. Stasov, "Конец выставки Верещагина в Париже" [The End of the Vereshchagin Exhibition in Paris], *Selected Works*, vol. 2, 96.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Said emphasized this difference between Russian and European imperialism (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 10).

<sup>42</sup> On "internal" Russian orientalism see: Kirill Kobrin, "От патерналистского проекта власти к шизофрении: 'ориентализм' как российская проблема" [From the Paternalistic Project of the Powers that Be to Schizophrenia: "Orientalism" as a Russian Problem], in: *Неприкосновенный запас* [An Inviolable Reserve], no. 3 (2008); Alexey Kurbanovsky, "Ориентализм: народность как 'экзотика' (на полях Эдварда Саида)" [Orientalism: Nationality as "the Exotic" (In the Margins of Edward Said)], in: *Искусствознание* [Art Studies], no. 1-2 (2011).



Byzantine and Orthodox, as popular and peasant, and as Asiatic, consolidated by the long period of Russian subjection to the Mongol yoke in the medieval period.

[55] Geyns wrote in his foreword to the catalogue of Vereshchagin's *Turkestan exhibition*:

"To me at least it seemed, on the basis of the careful study of life in Central Asia, that the origin of much we find in Russian beliefs lies in Mongol customs."<sup>43</sup>

[56] Geyns' opinion was not his alone and his words should be seen as the expression of a familiar topos in Russian national historical self-awareness.

[57] In his review of Vereshchagin's *Turkestan exhibition* of 1874 Stasov made the following significant comment:

"The longer you look at these scenes and characters, the more you study the customs and morals [...], the stronger you feel the link between our Old Rus and this world, therefore Vereshchagin's paintings take on a truly historic significance for us."<sup>44</sup>

[58] Vereshchagin may not have had any Kalmyk blood but his maternal great-grandmother was a Tatar from the Caucasus. His own appearance "strongly reflected the Tatar type" and he declared – to Western journalists among others – "I am only three-quarters Russian and one-quarter Tatar",<sup>45</sup> thus quite deliberately and not without some pride exaggerating the percentage of Tatar blood in his veins.<sup>46</sup> And yet Vereshchagin also stated quite unambiguously "I have never felt any *passionate love* for the East, damn it!",<sup>47</sup> demonstrating that his own sense of self reflected quite keenly the inherent contradictions within the Russian East-West identity.

[<top>](#)

## Conclusion

[59] It is thus seen that although Vereshchagin was clearly inspired in his *Turkestan* series by the orientalist paintings of Gérôme, this only serves to highlight how his works depart from those of his teacher in their perception and presentation of the East.

[60] Both Gérôme and Vereshchagin paid considerable attention to specific ethnographic details. Gérôme incorporated such details into striking and often clearly invented scenes which he himself had never witnessed: note the numerous depictions of voluptuous and sensuous oriental beauties in harems and baths. The widespread depiction of female nudity in French orientalist painting was of course determined not so much by the realities of life in the East as by the European artistic tradition, within which

---

<sup>43</sup> Catalogue of Paintings, Studies and Drawings of V. V. Vereshchagin, III.

<sup>44</sup> *Санкт-Петербургские ведомости* [St Petersburg News], no. 77 (19 March 1874), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in: Stasov, "Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin", 215.

<sup>46</sup> Kalmyks and Tatars are descendants of the Mongolian and Turkic tribes. Both Turkic and Mongol blood flowed in Tamerlane's veins.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in: Lebedev, *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin*, 54. Italics in the original.

the nude occupied a central place. The lack of female nudes in the Turkestan series was partly due to the fact that, unlike his French teacher, Vereshchagin did not consider himself to be the natural heir to the European tradition; the eroticised depiction of the nude was alien to his work overall. But it also resulted from his desire, as a Realist painter, to depict scenes he had himself witnessed, or which had been described by reliable sources. In Central Asia Vereshchagin had no access to harems or female baths, but he did witness the display of the charming, androgynous boy dancers known as *bacheh*. His hints at homosexual practices in the East predated those of Gérôme and differed from them in their restrained key, deprived of the hedonism and eroticism that suffused the French painter's works.

[61] In Central Asia Vereshchagin was a frequent observer of the sale of slaves, of which Gérôme would seem to have known only by report in northern Egypt. In Turkestan too, Vereshchagin had seen Asiatic soldiers beheading their enemies according to their custom, while Gérôme presumably could have seen such scenes only in his nightmares. If Gérôme's manipulations of severed heads and his treatment of slave markets turned them into artistic scenes, in Vereshchagin's paintings they were representations of a specific harsh reality.

[62] Of course, in part Vereshchagin's more profound and more direct experiences were dictated by the situation in Turkestan itself, almost untouched by European influences, in contrast to the Mediterranean East through which Gérôme had travelled.

[63] Moreover, Vereshchagin's role as official artist of Russian expansion into Central Asia meant that his Turkestan series was inevitably tied up with imperial political aims. The revelation of the East as the epitome of barbarity – as seen from the viewpoint of European cultural superiority and justifying Western imperial ambitions – which was a defining feature European orientalist painting, was thus far more clearly expressed in the Turkestan series than in the works of many European artists, including Gérôme. Such a depiction was supported by Vereshchagin's own preference for critical Realism. Yet the Turkestan series has a specifically Russian orientalist aspect that paradoxically contradicts its imperialistic overtones. This "internal" Russian orientalism might be defined as the ability to conceive of the East not just from the position of the West but from the East itself, so that it is not an alternative to Russian identity but a fundamental, problematic and current element within it. This reception of the East comes through in Vereshchagin's Turkestan series and was noted by both Russian and foreign contemporaries. And although Vereshchagin learned the international language of orientalism from Gérôme, enabling him to present the specifically Russian understanding and experience of the East to non-Russian viewers, it is this reception of the East that is the most important aspect of his work, setting it apart from that of Gérôme and distinguishing it from Western European orientalist painting overall.

*Translation by Catherine Phillips*

[<top>](#)

