

**Art and Artists as Agents of Empire: "Russianness" in the Exhibitions of Vasily  
Vereshchagin.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis deals with the art of Vasily Vereshchagin (1842-1904), a Russian artist of the second half of the nineteenth century. He had a high international reputation, and broad international recognition, with exhibitions often taking place in Europe and the United States. The thesis argues, that his international experience and reception of his artwork was based on the pre-existing understanding of what Russian art should portray. This opinion was rooted in understanding of "Russianness", formulated by the cultural mythology of the Russian Empire, and made any Russian artist, in this case - Vereshchagin - a representative of the empire and a speaker on its behalf. As examples, I use two exhibitions - in London in 1873 and in Vienna in 1885. My sources are press reports, surrounding those events, as well as texts written by Vereshchagin himself in historical journals. Some other sources include books on Russianness, published at the time. The thesis also shows how the artist became an agent of cultural diplomacy.

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## Introduction

“I simply want to say that anyone who misses the chance to see these paintings will miss the best opportunity to understand the age in which he lives. If nineteenth century ever had a prophet, then that prophet is the Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin”.<sup>1</sup> This was the characteristic supposedly given to the Russian artist by a British Christian newspaper in 1887, when it was assessing his paintings of Palestine and the Holy Land.<sup>2</sup> The series of so called “Palestinian sketches” were created following Vereshchagin’s trip to the Holy Land and its surroundings in 1874. In a true realist manner, the artist was aiming to portray the landscapes of the places where biblical events had taken place, and illustrate to stories of the Bible in a well-researched, realistic manner, to depict the stories how they would have taken place. Once exhibited, these series had received rather controversial reviews both from Russian Orthodox officials and European Catholics. The main premise for their indignation lay precisely within the artist’s idea of realistic depiction, sometimes – with photographic naturalism. In the opinion of, for example, the Viennese Catholic cardinal, who in 1885 had started a campaign against Vereshchagin’s exhibition, Vereshchagin’s portrayal of the Bible was blasphemous, as it brought down holy events to a naturalistic, human level.<sup>3</sup> For Vereshchagin, who had conducted huge research in order to create these series, this argument not only contradicted his opinion on the matter of biblical history, but the entire point of art in the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Vereshchagin, Vasily. *Realism*. New York, American Art Galleries, 1889. I am using the digitalized version of the text from the database of a project on Russian art criticism: <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/rva/texts.html>. Last accessed: April 16, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> In his texts, Vereshchagin had stated the origin of this quote as coming from either "Christian" or "The London Christian" from the issue of December 2, 1887. Neither of these newspapers seems to have existed at the time. With a variety of other Christian newspapers in Britain, it is possible that Vereshchagin had simply made a mistake, but, as per my research through British Historical Archive website, none of those periodicals mention Vereshchagin on that given date. Thus, while this quote sums up Vereshchagin's views on realism and his assessment of his own art perfectly, it is not certain, whether it existed at all.

<sup>3</sup> Cölestin Joseph Cardinal Ganglbauer Fürst Erzbischof. Protest gegen Wereschagin’s in Künstlerhaus zu Wien ausgestellt Gemälde “Die Heilige Familie” und “Die Auferstehung Christi”. [Wiener] *Diözesanblatt*, №21, 1885. P. 242-243.

Vasily Vereshchagin was a Russian artist who truly embodied the “spirit of his age”. While his art was perceived as provocative by contemporaries, he exemplified the main conceptual traits of art approaching the fin-de-siecle. As an artist, he was an example of a self-made man, an enthusiast working both with different forms of art and literature (he also published novels) and a person with a seemingly constant changing political affiliation. Throughout his life, he was both cooperative with the Russian imperial authorities and acted as a free and independent travelling artist. This self-positioning allowed him to create an image of a highly socially aware person, and rendered a "prophetic" role for his art.

Vereshchagin spent a lot of time abroad. Due to his travels, he became recognized as a “Russian” artist outside Russia through and through. For him, it was not only a question of national affiliation. His “Russianness” became his artistic image, part of his presentation. For the international audience, his art represented messages from the Russian Empire, as it were, or from the Russian nation, depending on the context. Thus, through his published texts and images, through exhibitions and printed sketches, and, importantly, successful entrepreneurship, Vasily Vereshchagin became a Russian representative, speaking on behalf of the Russian Empire.

His short biography, as well as the timeline of the main events of his life, can be found in the appendix of this thesis. In this introduction I focus on the main research questions of this thesis, my main arguments, approaches and historiographical literature review.

### **Methodology and approaches.**

Vasily Vereshchagin’s art and career have been thoroughly studied within Soviet art history. His main biography was released in 1958 in a monographic book by Andrei Lebedev.<sup>4</sup> The book provides a lot of factual material and descriptive painting analysis. Vereshchagin’s biography is shown through the narrative common for Soviet art historiography on the second half of the

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<sup>4</sup> A.K. Lebedev, *Vasily Vereshchagin. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*. [Vasily Vereshchagin. Life and Art] (Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1958).

nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> It accentuates Vereshchagin's anti-clericalism, his pacifism, standing against tsarism, strong governmental opposition and a prophetic mission as an artist, a patriot and a Russian citizen. This book, while not conceptualizing further than this narrative, provides a broad factual background and source database.

In terms of any conceptualization attempts that go beyond Vereshchagin's biography, his persona mainly interested historians studying Russian Orientalism, the Russian conquest of Central Asia or the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. Researchers choose Vereshchagin's paintings of these events, as well as his publications in Russian and international press about them. These sources are used either illustratively (for example, as images in appendixes or as witnesses' accounts) or as a framework for analysis of Russia's "Orientalism".<sup>6</sup> Vereshchagin is portrayed, contrary to the Soviet interpretation, in direct collaboration with the Russian Empire, as its representative. His partnership or opposition with imperial policies and institutions had become subjects of PhD dissertations and some articles, with the main research question being whether or not he collaborated at all. Vereshchagin's relationship with the Russian Empire, and anything Russian, in general, lies within a complexity of factors, where "Orientalism" is only one side of the picture.<sup>7</sup> This case alone does not answer questions about Russian Orientalism, but can be used for showing the importance of the notion of one's "belonging" or not to the Russian Empire. The reason this debate is important for this thesis is that it shows the processes

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<sup>5</sup> For example, this narrative is still prevalent enough to be provided in textbooks on Russian art history in higher education: D.V. Sarabianov. *Istoriia Russkogo Iskusstva Vtoroi Poloviny XIX Veka* [History of Russian Art of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century], (Moscow, MGU Publishing House, 1989). This textbook is used as a foundation for classes on Russian nineteenth century art.

<sup>6</sup> It is used in such a way here: David Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (Yale University Press, 2010); Viktor Taki, *Tsar and Sultan: Russian Encounters with the Ottoman Empire* (I. B. Tauris, 2016); Albert Kaganovich, *Druziia Ponevole. Rossiia I Bukharskiye Yevrei 1800-1917* [Friends Against Their Will. Russia and Bukhara Jews 1800-1917] (Moscow, Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> The common problem with research centered on Vereshchagin is focusing on established narratives about him only in the context of his persona. With research on Russian Orientalism touching his Turkestan series, the central question it usually poses is whether or not a particular model of understanding Orientalism applies to him. An example of this is this PhD dissertation: Natasha Medvedev, *The Contradictions in Vereshchagin's Turkestan Series: Visualizing the Russian Empire and its Others* (University of California, 2009); see also – Elena Krylova, "Pervye Vystavki Sredneaziatskikh Rabot V.V. Vereshchagina v Periodicheskoi Pechati I Problema Interpretatsii Proizvedenii Turkestanskogo Tsykla" [First Exhibitions of Vasily Vereshchagin's Artwork in Periodic Press and Problems of Interpretation of the Turkestan Series], *Znanie, Ponomanie, Umenie* (2015): 335-342.



behind portraying this belonging in the press and the way it is analyzed by historians. These categories of belonging are central to establishing the reciprocal relationship between the artist's work and its reception.

The thesis shares several methodological approaches, depending on the questions the research poses in different parts of my work. The methodological framework incorporates institutional history of art and discourse analysis, as the object of research is not the artist per se, but the relations of the artist, his works, and self-representations with other actors and institutions. Examples of such research have existed in European and English-language academia since the middle of twentieth century. They have attempted to frame the ways art markets functioned in relations to art institutions, how artists developed their careers, how they established their identity and representation, as well as their participation in various organizations.<sup>8</sup> In the Russian case, a ground-breaking study is Andrei Shabanov's book on Itinerants (*Peredvizhniki*)<sup>9</sup> – an organization of artists, performing mostly in the style of realism and doing exhibitions around the country. Shabanov speaks about the partnership as an official organization, while analyzing their self-representation tactics. The main argument states, that close state recognition of the partnership and commercial deals that resulted from it allowed the artists to exercise in other functions, including education, sponsorships, and charity. This draws a drastic difference with the way Itinerants have been treated in historiography previously, and I am going to attempt to place Vereshchagin within the same field and locate his career and representation tactics in close relationship with institutions he had to work with (or against).

The object of research is also the practice of self-representation, and documents that portray it, as well as information on reception of this process. The strategy of Vereshchagin's self-representation should definitely be viewed in the context of (and sometimes – in response to) a

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Harrison C. White и Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and careers: institutional change in the French painting world* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1993); Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Andrey Shabanov, *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia: The Peredvizhniki, a Partnership of Artists*, 1 edition (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019).

specific social situation. In this case – Russia after the Great Reforms. The empire took part in Central Asia campaigns and several wars. Meanwhile, the Russian art market was developing, as well as the scene where art functioned. It was institutionalized through exhibitions, education and press. Thus, according to Olga Maiorova, the artist's representation, whether in the Russian Empire or abroad, lay within an established cultural mythology, portraying the image of the Russian Empire.<sup>10</sup> Such processes of image-making existed in other countries – France, Great Britain, Germany, and Vereshchagin's performance as an artist was included in these narratives, and can be traced in public press, exhibitions, etc. Katia Dianina argues, that “art was present not only as a collection of masterpieces, but also as a network of conflicting opinions and debates, which dealt with many topical issues of the day besides fine arts”.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the concept of “the other” sums up the main axis of this thesis. In his book “Uses of the “Other”” Iver Neumann analyzes, how European identity politics were based on imagining “the Other”.<sup>12</sup> That “Other” could be American, Turkish or Russian and at different stages these constructs of imagining oneself in contrast with it can be traced in various categories, including art and literature, clothing and education. Vereshchagin's “otherness” was a clear feature in his representation. His ethnicity, subject belonging and loyalty were unchangeably the background that allowed building conclusions about him.

Similarly to Katia Dianina's approach in her book “When Art Makes News”, I will not be focusing on Vereshchagin's artwork itself, but rather on public events created by it. These events had a strong connection with his national affiliation. These connections are the subject of this thesis. With the history of public debates on Russia originating in Europe, I will view Vereshchagin's activity within the given timeframe through the prism of debates on what constituted Russian distinctiveness.

<sup>10</sup> O. E. Maiorova, *From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation Through Cultural Mythology, 1855-1870*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Katia Dianina, *When Art Makes News: Writing Culture and Identity in Late Imperial Russia, 1851-1900*. (Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Iver Neumann. *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

## Russian Art and "Russianness"

As a discipline, art history is prone to be treated as a separate field. Countless studies of color theories, genres, styles and other aspects that form the field can be studied within their own terms. Without an interdisciplinary approach, however, this gives art autonomy that it does not have on its own<sup>13</sup>: in other words, art, its production and artists themselves cannot be viewed without the institutions that operate in the production of given art, and the social conditions that surround and dictate it.

History of art had undergone dramatic changes throughout the twentieth century. From the 1960s this particular problem - separation of art from social processes it was related to - was assessed through methods of social history.<sup>14</sup> Researchers focused their attention primarily on the environment where certain art tendencies had developed. Rather than asking questions of what art and its expressions can tell about a certain era, new concepts turned to conditions and circumstances that enabled art to convey certain messages. Categories such as reception and audience became an important stepping-stone in assessing the premise of each piece, style or individual artist. The subject matter of art pieces, their details and analysis of them revolved around the contents of those messages and their relation to other processes of the given time. Conceptually, this was a new framework, drastically different from the biographical approach of the late nineteenth - early twentieth centuries, through which art was analyzed or explained

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<sup>13</sup> There are many studies that appear to be detached from any social connections between art, artists and events it occupies. For Russian art, the most exemplary case, in my opinion, are works by A.L. Punin and V.G. Lisovskii, both prominent historians of architecture. Despite having produced extensive amount of books on various topics ranging from Russian imperial to Italian to Finnish architecture, their books are highly descriptive and lack any analysis that is further than the visual one.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the works related to social history of art used in this thesis: Dianina, Katia. *When Art Makes News: Writing Culture and Identity in Imperial Russia*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2013; Maiorova, Olga. *From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855-1870*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2010; Rampley, Matthew. *Vienna School of Art History. Empire and Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918*. The Pennsylvania University Press, 2013; 21. Shabanov, Andrei. *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia. The Peredvizhniki, a Partnership of Artists*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019; White, Harrison C. and White, Cynthia A. *Canvases and Careers. Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. The University of Chicago Press and London. 1993; Valkenier, Elizabeth, *Russian Realism Art. The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition*. Columbia University Press, 1989; Jensen, Robert. *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. Princeton University Press, 1994.

through the biography of its creator. It also stood apart from the concept of viewing art through a political prism, with a direct purpose attached to its existence, which was quite popular in the field of art history in the first half of the twentieth century (for example, within the conceptualization of socialist realism). One can find countless examples of such a method in popular literature that spoke of art, for example, itinerary guides or museum handbooks, and, despite a common assertion, it was not strictly connected to totalitarian regimes.

With the application of methods of social history,<sup>15</sup> art was included into social structures in need of analysis the same way corporations, organizations, social movements, literature or press were. It became viewed itself as a professional field, with certain logic that is often very disconnected from aesthetics, with professional segregation between its participants, with institutions that function within a given environment. With this presupposition, art can be studied in order to learn more about issues not directly related to it. This thesis is an attempt to do just that through an example of one artist - Vasily Vereshchagin.

One reason for choosing this artist as a subject of this work is that he had left a significant amount of sources behind him. He was a very actively publishing person, so in addition to his paintings and sketches (what usually constitutes the so-called "heritage" of an artist), he has left many pages of articles, interviews and travelogues. International European press had covered his exhibitions and travels very efficiently (just for this case alone I am using press from Austro-Hungarian Empire, France, Great Britain, and some sources from the United States), and this provides a foundation for viewing his art in context with wider network of events far beyond the Russian Empire. What is particularly important, and would be further discussed in this chapter,

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<sup>15</sup> By this I mean attempts to explore the nature of social structures, institutional hierarchy, personal relationships between people and their views. I also attempt to see, how these structures were reflected in everyday life. A brief look on history of ideas and the way those ideas were reflected in contemporary sources is also what is included in such an approach when it comes to art history.

is the inclusion of Vereshchagin as a "representative" of contemporary Russian art into books devoted to studies of Russia.

Thus, my sources are press reports, surrounding those events, as well as texts written by Vereshchagin himself in historical journals. Some other sources include books on Russianness, published at the time.

As of today, the most in-depth study on Vereshchagin remains his biography, written by Andrei Lebedev (which I mentioned above). Despite being very deeply rooted in primary sources, the main problem of that work is an absolute lack of contextualization outside a given Soviet narrative, which portrayed any artist who worked within the branch of so-called "critical realism" as "liberal" or anti-governmental. With this presupposition, the book excludes any perceptions of Vereshchagin's art (and views) that may have been rather problematic for such direct statements. Paintings showing Central Asia conquest, Russo-Turkish war images, even ethnographic studies are assessed purely from a point of view stating, that the artist was "exposing" the atrocities of the empire. My research has shown, however, that this approach is not always successful, as Vereshchagin's art and published work was not ideologically motivated, and rather adhered to conditions (which were ever changing), under which it was produced.

The question of whether or not Vereshchagin was a representative of the Russian empire is particularly important to highlight. The notions of him being its collaborator or opponent are both very generalizing ideas, each in their own way. None, however, is new to conceptualizing his art. In the late nineteenth century as his artwork was seeing the light for the first time, as it was touring European capitals, as it was being bought by Pavel Tretyakov<sup>16</sup> as a part of his

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<sup>16</sup> Pavel Tretyakov (1832-1898), Russian businessman and patron. His collection served as a basis for the first gallery of Russian art in Moscow - the Tretyakov Gallery.

future gallery of Russian art, the question of who was speaking was the basis for perception. For a European viewer, the question remained: was it the Russian empire telling something? Was it the Russian people, the primordial *narod*? Was it the artist personally? If so, where did he get those ideas?

These questions became possible due to a very specific situation. Most historians studying this matter on various other examples (other artists, other countries, etc.) agree, that it is the highly developed press coverage that allowed art to take part in "discoveries" of other nations. In the case of the Russian empire, the "discovery" process usually included a desire to find proof to an existing presupposition. This starting point for Russia included categories of backwardness, civilization versus barbarism debate, a general discussion of modernity and pure ethnographic interest.

### **Seeing "the Russian" in Russian Art**

Discussions concerning Russian backwardness have been present for centuries. While concerning largely social or economical aspects of Russian development or the functioning institutions of the empire, the "backwardness" discourse inevitably included an assertion to the state of Russian culture.

This understanding was one of the central ones in the Enlightenment era. Larry Wolff points, that the discovery of Russia as a country on the margins of Europe, was of interest to European travellers mainly from positions of climate, language and cultural practices.<sup>17</sup> Iver Neumann

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<sup>17</sup> Wolff, Larry. *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, 1994.

draws a similar conclusion – eighteenth century Russian empire presented itself as an undiscovered territory, striving to be European, but, nevertheless, remarkably different.<sup>18</sup>

This cultural emphasis was not positioned on art as a representative force. In the eighteenth century art was not representing the nation or its peoples in any country – in the European tradition it was, on the contrary, a representative of the might and prosperity of the monarch. This was the foundation of various royal collections and museums. For example, the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg housed strictly the imperial collection, along with a library and a rarities cabinet of Catherine the Great. While it was available for visiting for delegations, highly appointed officials or students of the Imperial Academy of Arts, it never received a public status of a museum being open for all. The collection itself did not represent “Russia” either – most of the works were carefully selected and bought from abroad, arranged by the keepers and the monarch her or, later, himself and consisted of masterpieces of foreign artists, many of them long gone.

The curriculum of the Imperial Academy of Arts since its formation in 1764<sup>19</sup> was also aligned with the Enlightenment course of “discovering” Russia’s place in European culture. The studies for future artists, sculptors and architects were based on vigorous copying of renowned European works, mostly – from High Renaissance, and travelling abroad to further their experience within that sphere. Upon returning from the trip abroad (the so-called “Pensioner trip”, as all selected artists received a pension throughout the time of their voyages), the graduates were now required to serve the monarchy and glorify it in art. From the state point of view, this shaped a specific understanding of the artist’s role in society all the way to the middle of nineteenth century. See a fragment of a letter, written by Alexander Ivanov in 1830. The artist was on a trip to Florence,

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<sup>18</sup> See chapter on Russia here: Neumann, Iver B. *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation*. Manchester University Press, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> In 1764, the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg had been given its Statute (*Ustav*) by Catherine the Great, and it marked the artist as a valuable contribution to society. He was freed from military service and of any possibility of becoming a serf. See, i.e., Valkenier, p. 3.

and this letter was written to the Society for the Advancement of Artists in Saint Petersburg. He is describing a visit to a gallery, and note, how, after an overview of items that have impressed him so much as an artist, Ivanov proceeds to note, what was the most pleasurable aspect of this artistic, professional, aesthetic experience:

“After that we have a hall of the Florentine school. In the final one there is a painting by Bartolomeo, depicting the Virgin surrounded by several saints. The master, by outlining the beauty and draping of every figure, retouched the entire painting in a single color: firm knowledge of how to draw, a solid, important beauty of the composition, diversity in the expressions of the heads, wonderful taste of the drapes – all of this is expressed in this marvelous under painting! Death did not allow Bartolomeo to finish this glorious painting. Here are also sketches by Leonardo da Vinci; also, a great piece by Chigoli in colors: it depicts the suffering of St. Laurentius; some sketches of Bartolomeo, done with exceptional finality and taste, *and, finally, with great pleasure of the soul we encounter the bust of emperor Alexander I. As artists, we would say, that this piece is of Torvaldsens level; as Russians, we are happy to find in foreign lands true respect to our honorable monarch.*”<sup>20</sup>

The division of the roles of an “artist” and a “Russian” within the perception of a single piece of art is a quality with which the artist of the pre-national tradition was trained to view the works around them. National level of Russian art, let alone “Russianness” in it, was not yet within the picture, despite the development of the so-called “Official Nationality”. The genesis of the idea of “Russianness” in images came upon later. In the second half of the nineteenth century it became not only a concept specially developed in images, architecture, sculpture, literature, music and theater, but became a factor on international arena that shaped the careers of various people involved.

When developing an outline for the genesis of the concept of “Russianness” in art in the second half of the nineteenth century, I am mainly talking about painting, with slight references to architecture and even slighter – to sculpture. This has to do with two facts: in the Russian empire (and, generally, elsewhere also) the paintings were the most highly recognizable and open for debate. They were perceived as a fine piece of literature would have been, exhibitions were

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<sup>20</sup> Ivanov, Aleksandr. Aleksandr Andreevich Ivanov. Ego zhizn' i perepiska [His life and correspondence]. Published by Mikhail Botkin, Saint Petersburg, 1880. 15



formed out of them and accompanied by catalogues and newspaper commentary later. They were reprinted in albums and journals, used as illustrations themselves and became a distinctly larger part of life of consumers than architecture or sculpture. Architecture journals were generally more professionally oriented (take, for example, *Zodchii*<sup>21</sup>), and sculpture was present in the public debate so long as it exemplified some large message or event (i.e., a statue for the Millenium of Rus in Velikii Novgorod). The second fact that led me to keeping a firmer hold on painting is the broad professionalization that this sphere offered in the second half of the nineteenth century. While architecture also offered a variety of career options, it was painting that formed the art market, got involved with state and local officials when entering the editing houses with illustrations and, what is very important for this particular case – was not bound to a specific location. In a very “non-historical” way to put it, it was a painter who was most likely to, using modern language, become a freelancer, a self-made man. Such a man was Vasily Vereshchagin, the main character of this thesis.

### **Chronological frame**

I am focusing on the following period – pre-Crimean War (early 1850-s) to late 1880s. I am specifically putting these years because, while I am using them as a concrete timeframe, “Russianness” did not fully originate there (as in, we cannot put a spot-on date or event to represent the “birth” of this concept), and its development definitely did not stop. Here, while the initial starting point (the Great Exhibition in London in 1851) serves as a definitive border, the closing one – 1880-s – is formed merely by the date of the events I will be talking about (the scandal revolving around Vereshchagin’s paintings in Vienna in 1885). As my two central case studies for this thesis, I will be looking at Vereshchagin's exhibition in London in 1873 and in Vienna in 1885. These events show two different sides of the same problem: the role of artist in

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<sup>21</sup> *Zodchii* (literally - "Architect") was a monthly (since 1902 - weekly) journal published by Saint Petersburg Society of Architects from 1872 to 1924. It contained articles on the nature of art and architecture, elaborations on styles, debates concerning national culture and practical guides so projecting architectural forms. Along this, it published information on members of the Society, on Academy of Arts, and artistic life in general.

the era when almost every international action outside of the Russian Empire was viewed in the context of purposefully functioning cultural mythology. In the first exhibition, Vereshchagin never concealed, that he is promoting Russian colonial expansion. In the second, his "Russian" mission was imposed upon him by the audience, and this time, the artist was actively denying this nationalizing aspect.

### **"Russiannes" in Art from the Point of View of the Russian Empire**

While this thesis is primarily focusing on case studies regarding perceptions of Russian art and Vereshchagin's paintings abroad, it is important to acknowledge the state of Russian art within the Russian empire itself. My argument is that European debates regarding Russian national art, representation of Russian people and any studies on the matter of looking, acting and being "Russian" were closely connected to development of these ideas within the empire itself.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to break this dialogue, as it is reciprocal: both Russian ideas on national identity, as well as its representation, and European understandings of the similar topic, existed in dialogue with each other. This dialogue consisted of reactions to one another, debates, sometimes open public conflicts, reflected in the press, and sometimes – further development of ideas of one side in response to the other. Thus, while locating any exact "perpetrators" of this dialogue would present to be a difficult and fruitless task, it is important to assess the "state of art" and some key points regarding Russian art field, art market and its relationship to "nationality".

### **Russian art market and institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century**

In the history of Russian art the second half of the nineteenth century holds a place of a vibrant era. Firstly, contrary to previous years, Imperial Academy of Arts ceased to be the only institution providing art education. It was still the closest to the imperial bureaucratic apparatus – it was under the ruling of Ministry of Imperial Court, with its directors being members of the

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<sup>22</sup> Dianina, 46

Romanov family.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, it provided a rank for its graduates – the lowest one, the fourteenth, but it granted access to further growth up the career ladder. Those, however, who failed to study within the Academy, had, besides private tutoring options and free visitation of Academy without further degree (*vol'noshushateli*), an opportunity to study art in other institutions. There was a school in Moscow (*Uchilishche Zhivopisi, Vayaniya i Zodchestva*), and in Saint Petersburg another prominent institution - Society for the Advancement of Artists (*Obshchestvo Pooshreniia Khudozhnikov*) offered courses. This association, established earlier in the century, became known for hosting art classes, organizing exhibitions and providing jobs for artists, who were both within and outside of the academic ranking system. Further in the century it became a strong counterpart to the Imperial Academy of Arts primarily for this reason. Insofar as the Academy itself, it remained the preferred option for career-oriented artists, even though the education itself appeared more and more “dry” or restrictive, as the criticism of the first half of the century continuously hinted.<sup>24</sup>

The diversity of art education methods and ways to include oneself in the field of art production that developed within the nineteenth century considerably influenced the art market. The Academy ceased to be the leading organizer of exhibitions, thus providing an opportunity for marketing options to develop elsewhere. The Society for Advancement was heavily involved in exhibiting art for profit, as well as for charity. Private collectors were starting to open their storage rooms and starting a course of art trade. The embodiment of this newly functioning art market, thriving outside of institutional system, came in the figures of the Itinerants (*Peredvizhniki*) - a partnership of artists, organized by individuals from Saint Petersburg and

<sup>23</sup> During the reign of Nicholas I Imperial Academy of Arts became subordinate to the Ministry of the Imperial Court, thus strengthening the role of the state regarding its directing. Valkenier, 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Art criticism as a genre developed in Russia in the early 1800s, but with strict censorship it never allowed open elaborations on the state of education in the Academy. Some art historians do not see this restriction as problematic, but rather as an instrumental framework that provided a legal foundation for development of art criticism. See: Makhrov, Alexey. The Pioneers of Russian Art Criticism: Between State and Public Opinion, 1804-1855. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 614-633. p. 620

Moscow in 1870, to pursue commercial and aesthetic goals and sell art through moveable exhibitions.

This newly gained "liberalization" of the Russian art sphere can be explained on various levels. Soviet art historians usually aligned it with the growth of intelligentsia's influence.<sup>25</sup> Within this viewpoint, the Itinerants themselves were viewed as members of it. This narrative is still one of primary among Russian Academy of Arts theoreticians,<sup>26</sup> whereas the issue of what intelligentsia was within the contexts of the Russian empire of the Great Reform era remains a historiographical gap to this day. In the classical narrative, largely promoted by Soviet art historians, artists are included in the group of *raznochinnaya intelligentsia* (intelligentsia of different ranks), along with journalists, scientists, writers or musicians. This approach holds a problem - it responds to the question of what caused the "liberalization" of art (in means of more widely open market, diversity in subject matter, development of genres and increased access to art education) without pre-stating an obvious problem: was art indeed liberalized and what is this alleged liberalization?

This question needs to be addressed for the following reason. With a pre-supposition, that art had, indeed, become liberal, due to efforts of intelligentsia, one gives too much credit to the relationship between a very much discussed, but still debatable group of people and artists. It places Russian art of the era into a vacuum, isolating it from outer influences, discussions and - which is also important - the role of the State, which, despite a commonly accepted narrative, did

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<sup>25</sup> Relationship between artists and intelligentsia remains a historiographical gap. This is partially due to the ambiguity of the phenomena of "intelligentsia" itself. On the other hand, the artists themselves were on various occasions considered to be a part of intelligentsia, thus also subject of the same ideological paradigm (if one admits that it existed). In Soviet historiography this proposition was supported by aesthetical ideas of Chernyshevskii.

<sup>26</sup> Recently, a book on the Itinerants was published by Elena Nesterova, a renown Academy of Arts professor and a specialist on nineteenth century Russian art. Despite being a novelty, the book follows the same conceptual approach as "classical" Soviet art history of the 1960-1980s, emphasizing the subject matter of the paintings over the sphere they were created in, and merging artistic programs with oppositionist political movements. See: Nesterova, Elena. *Tovarishchestvo Peredvizhnikov. Demokraticeskii Realizm*. [The Society of Itinerants. Democratic Realism]. Kuchkovo pole, 2018.

not hold a specifically contradictory, oppositionist approach towards the new "national" art.<sup>27</sup> For Vereshchagin, it is important to acknowledge this as a background, as he was placed in this discussion both by his contemporaries (as the case studies further show) and historiographically.

## **Public Sphere and Art**

Over the years various authors have spoken about art of this period through the historiographical debate on public sphere. In the recent years, such authors as Olga Mayorova, Andrei Shabanov, Katia Dianina or Ilya Dorontchenkov have analyzed Russian art of the late nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> A generalized statement that embodies all aforementioned research is that in order for art to become a form of social activity, it should become an instrument (and a subject) of cultural mythology,<sup>29</sup> and enter public discourse and debate. This is possible only within a developed and functioning public sphere, which is connected to development of publishing press. In other words, it is then, when, as Katia Dianina states in her same-titled book, "art makes news". And as soon as it "makes" these news (in a similar way as any other event would make the margins of a paper), it becomes a participant in the same conversations that occupy the contemporary reading public. While I am not myself engaging in the debate on the public sphere in relation to art, I am keeping this research as a background for this thesis.

## **Russian National Art Representation: Expectations and "Reality"**

In the second half of the nineteenth century this reading public is also one that attends exhibitions to see the kind of art that is promoted. That being said, "promoted" is too strong of a

<sup>27</sup> This is evident from the growth of genre painting within the walls of the Academy. While still not allowed to be chosen as subjects for Golden medal examinations (the highest graduating prize), subject matters of lives of petty bourgeoisie, folk scenes and family life were being accepted for the Silver medal prize. Further into the reign of Alexander III, the imperial court became a consumer of such art itself. It also included many grand state commissions, for example, portraits of Alexander III made by Ilya Repin. See more on this in: Valkenier, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Among with works already mentioned, see: Dorontchenkov, Ilya. *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art, 1890s to Mid-1930s*. University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> When talking about cultural mythology, Olga Maiorova, whose book is referred to in this thesis, implies to a series of historical myths, including Russian nationality, spiritual birth, cultural traits and foundational tales. Together they constituted a character that defined the Russian empire.

word - in a typical newspaper of the time exhibitions announcements and articles related to them would not be given a distinct position. Unless a journal or a paper was directly devoted to art, such topics were placed in the same category as any other event. Vasily Vereshchagin's exhibitions, regardless of the country that talked about them, were described alongside such things as achievements in rabbit medicine experimentations and military news, theatre scandals and advertisements. Andrei Shabanov implies that this greatly lessened the distance between art and any other matter.

One of the questions that highlight the public discourse of the time is the question of national representation. Within the Russian case there is generally a translation remark regarding the word "national". In Russian it may be used in two ways - *narodnyi*, meaning "of the people" (associated with the population, with rural traditions, peasantry, folk culture) and *natsional'nyi*, a direct translation or "national", and associated with the nation. Within the context of my research, I am not making a direct differentiation between the two, unless necessary in a specific situation. Thus, I will be using "national" in both the meaning of *natsional'nyi* and *narodnyi*, as a more general term, which covers both the state and its people, unless otherwise mentioned. This question of national representation was developing, since the 1850s, as follows: what constitutes "Russianness" in a certain visual depiction? And what is important is that it was not fine art that postulated this question in the first place, nor was it used to answer it. Rather, within the formed discursive field that tried to offer an answer to this question, art was turning into one of the means to mirror this debate.

Katia Dianina argues, that there was a certain desire to gain an understanding of "Russianness" that appeared outside of the realm of art criticism, and took its genesis from the Great Exhibition of 1851.<sup>30</sup> In terms of providing a convincing image of the Russian empire and its people, the

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<sup>30</sup> Dianina, 40-41.

exhibition was a failure. This failure gave a powerful impulse to formulating Russian cultural mythology, development of "national" forms of visualization. This exhibition brought the "national" element to visual polemics, and the developing press provided a platform for those debates to come together. The question of how one can envision a certain nation found its way to the pages of newspapers both in the Russian empire and in Europe, and this created a pre-conception, that art is national, any form of it holds a "national imprint".

I apply this argument to my research, broadening it. I argue, that this pre-conception applied to any form of artistic event, not directly affiliated with national portrayal. In Europe, an exhibition of any Russian artist was perceived as undeniably "Russian", and the subject matter of the objects exhibited was directly perceived as narrative told by the Russian nation, people (*narod*) or state. This pre-conception followed the exhibitions of Vasily Vereshchagin around every European capital, and through press coverage of those events, through prefaces to catalogues and through some publications about them in the Russian empire one can see how art was one of the many platforms through which moving questions regarding national representation and its perception were transmitted.

Various authors who study Russian cultural mythology through this prism conclude that, despite their allegiance to their respective states, news outlets were connected with one another within an international network. The journalists exchanged news and prospects; some worked in a few journals or newspapers or bulletins at once; some, like a Russian art critic Vladimir Stasov<sup>31</sup> made part of his life's work to gather news about Russian art from abroad, and give responses to it in Russian press.

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<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906) was a Russian art critic. He was a supporter for the formation of Russian national style and its popularization, as well as its use for educational purposes. He also accumulated unprecedented control over any press regarding artistic issues, and was involved in reviewing publications on Russian artists abroad. For more information about Stasov and his role for Russian art criticism, see chapters 2 and 3 of Katia Dianina's book.

Vladimir Stasov, even in the days of his life, was regarded as a "fighter" for Russian art. This is exactly what is engraved on his tombstone in the necropolis of Alexandro-Nevisky Lavra in Saint Petersburg (*"Poborniku Russkogo Iskusstva"*). He was one of those people for whom it is difficult to provide a definition of a career, however, one can begin to name his actions with a long list. One of those was a sort of creation of biographies for people of art (both artists and musicians), actively publishing on their behalf, taking interviews, carefully watching out for their reception abroad, and providing a voice within the Russian press of the time for a "distinctly Russian" view of art.

What was this view? For Stasov, it realized itself in a motto "realism and nationality". In terms of fine arts, this meant a depiction of a proposed version of "Russianness", and exhibiting it, both domestically and abroad. Insofar as "realism" may be understood, it was, of course, a term more clearly portraying a method of constructing Russian visual identity in a way that it would be perceived credible and believable. Credibility as a category was an actively operating one: when "exhibiting" Russia, no matter within the empire or abroad, the question of whether the depicted scenery, subject matter or - especially with the development of physical anthropology - portrait of a particular ethnic group, was "true", was held as a decisive one to determine Russia's position in debates regarding the country and its people. It, in turn, was an important issue for public image within the policies of contemporary cultural diplomacy.

The grand debut of Russia's image on European arena came in 1851 with the opening of the first Great Exhibition in London. The question of "credibility" and trustfulness was at large: the main press coverage in London considered this event to be an inaccurate depiction of Russia, neither in terms of exhibited industrial objects, not in terms of fine arts.<sup>32</sup> In Saint Petersburg reaction to the press this event was vastly depicted as unnoticed, and eleven years later, in 1862, a new

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<sup>32</sup> Dianina, 45-48.



Great Exhibition, also in London, was used as an attempt to rehabilitate "Russianness". Being the voice of international artistic affairs in Saint Petersburg, Stasov wrote about the exhibition as if it was the first one to host the Russian pavilion at all. This, of course, is a subject of special research regarding the fabrication of Russian cultural mythology of the time, with one of the dimensions of it being the emergence of the debate on Russian national art, its nature, properties and narratives.

To assess the situation regarding Russian art of the time one inevitably has to consider the following factors. Firstly, Russian art was approached from various dimensions. It can be seen as a meta-complex, mostly because the idea of "Russian art" itself was perceived from a variety of levels. The first level would be the perception in the Russian Empire itself. A "Russian artist" in the mid-nineteenth century, depending on who is speaking at the time, may either constitute a state-accredited painter (sculptor, architect), who is an Academy graduate and associates with it on a regular basis. These would be imperial Russian artists, viewed almost entirely within the context of the empire, and, when abroad, they were its direct representatives. This is not just a discursive matter - this obligation of representing the Romanov empire was a legal one, and it can be traced in official Academy of Arts documentation regarding international pensioners, professors, apprenticeships, exhibitions and travel regulations all the way until 1917.<sup>33</sup> With the existence of other artistic groups - "free" artists, artists without a diploma, self-educated individuals or those who had dropped out of the Academy prior to obtaining a degree, the question remained open: can those people be included into strata of "Russian artists"?

The answer is not obvious. On the one hand, they were, of course, Russian artists, in the sense that they came from Russia, worked there and in most cases associated themselves with their respective surroundings and background. On the other hand - their art was not "Russian" from

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<sup>33</sup> Valkenier, 9-10.

the perspective of the Russian empire. This issue is not purely a stylistic matter: unless affiliated in some way with the Academy of Arts, an individual excluded himself from a bureaucratic career ladder, from official artistic positions and, finally from the position of an state imperial platform, delivered in paint or stone.

As a result, it were these groups of people (the "unaffiliated") that were juxtaposed to the Academy in traditional Soviet art historiography, with a usual addition of a certain liberal program that these artists were supposedly translating.

The second level is international perception. For a foreign observer, a "Russian" artist was any individual within the profession who came from Russia. Added to this was a component from Great Exhibitions experience - international items on display became a display of the nation, of the country. As the years went by, it became increasingly more difficult for a foreign observer, concerned with issues such as identity, nationality, or even simply aesthetics, to differentiate between "imperial" artist and a "free" one.

Thus, fabrication of cultural mythology that was happening on various levels provided a political subjectivity to any of its alleged carriers. While the Russian empire was trying to control the changing art market, developed a practical (and legal) formula of what constitutes a Russian artist (as it did in any area of public affairs), and offered an coherent foundational cultural myth for the country, ready for both internal use and international export, while carefully choosing imperial image, European audience was perceiving absolutely any artist, coming from Russia, as a representative of it.

"Russia" that was being represented, differed, of course, from person to person, and accounts in journals, newspapers, catalogues or travel volumes take different positions. Ultimately, "Russia"

and "Russianness" as offered by artists depended in perception upon what the spectator was looking for. For some, the word "Russia" rang a strong imperial connotation. From this point of view, any debates or actions that were attributed to the Russian empire were practically imposed on the artists exhibiting anything abroad. Any piece they created was pre-supposed to carry some sort of a Russian imperial idea, for example, Orientalizing policies, imperial expansionist projects, Orthodoxy domination, ethno-confessional policies, views on military dominion - these were some of the core topics that artists were expected to speak of, supposedly, on behalf of the empire.

A slightly different perspective of viewing "Russia" was an ethnographic one. This had deep roots in Enlightenment, when Russia constituted a subject of interest for ethnographers, naturalists and artists.<sup>34</sup> The main body of interest for them revolved around peasantry (even before the romantic association of them as pure carriers of national culture that the 1830s will bring). Ethnographers and sketchers, at one point - Vereshchagin among such people - studied their costumes, facial features, customs and traditions. This ethnographic understanding, which imposed primordial, naturalistic Russianness that was translated through its rural population, is recorded in travel accounts, both scientific and, what is more important for this research, public (meant for general reader's consumption).<sup>35</sup> For artists, it offered another lens through which their work was perceived, and it rarely played in their favor, as it hindered the credibility of any image shown. In comparison to this primordial, *narodnyi* ("popular", "of the people") version of Russia, very few items that one can portray can satiate the desire to see the "true" Russia.

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<sup>34</sup> This ethnographic approach to visual culture of Russia in the eighteenth and first half of nineteenth centuries is described in: Vishlenkova, Elena. *Vizual'noe narodovedenie imperii, ili "uvidet' russkogo dano ne kazhdomu"* [Visual Ethnography of the Empire, or "Not Everyone Can See the Russian"]. Moscow, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> For example, a study, meant for an unspecialized readership, published in 1872 in Leipzig, despite following the premise of talking about the newly "liberated" Russia following the Great Reforms, approaches the topic from an ethnographic point of view. It covers travels across Russian villages, looking at peasants and emphasizes special mysticism of the natural people of the land. See: Dixon, William Hepworth. *Free Russia*. Leipzig, Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1872.

Visually, these approaches came to being in the following ways. Those artists, who took the path of a state profession and managed to outwork the lowest careers into being employed by the Academy or by the court directly, were recruited for tasks of imperial portrayal. This particularly became apparent following the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. In its aftermath, a campaign aimed to create a celebratory image of the events had been started, with artists being hired to illustrate the themes of Russian army's steady progression, liberated Bulgarians, emperor being in the battlefield, his subsequent triumph that he shared with the locals, etc.<sup>36</sup> This created a steady view of a Russian artist of the time being one that projects important state events. This is very well reflected in documents such as obituaries, academy pamphlets, art journals and autobiographies of the artists. Those were found, firstly, in preparation for a journal to publish them, but also in the letters of retirement.<sup>37</sup>

Imperial artistic patronage was also present ceremoniously – starting from the 1870s, Imperial Academy of Art hosted special banquets for long-term members. They were not only representatives for the local long-lived artists within one corporation; they were an embodiment of imperial success. The ceremonial congratulatory speeches focused on the medals they received for their long service, the times when they were promoted along the ranks, their loyalty to the crown and Academy and their role in establishing the Russian national culture.<sup>38</sup> This raises the question of the extent to which this system projected Russian culture outside of the empire? In an overview of books and articles published in late nineteenth-early twentieth century it is quiet clear, that the system of a hierarchical artistic career within the Imperial Academy of Arts only worked as a national trait within the country. Abroad, however, the notion of what Russian national art was did not balance itself on any Russian imperial narrative, thus making a

<sup>36</sup> A large part of an exhibition on Russo-Turkish war held in Moscow in 2017 was devoted to the role of artists in its representation. Zhuravskaya I.L., Kolganova E.V. "For our friends." Catalogue of an exhibition devoted to 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberation of Bulgaria in 1877-1878. Moscow, State Historical Museum, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> For example, a highly successful state architect, "inventor" of "neo-Russian" style, Constantin Ton wrote in his letter of resignation from the Academy: "Having completed my duties before my Fatherland and the Academy..." Russian State Historical Archive. F. 789. O. 7. D. 80. P. 22.

<sup>38</sup> These ceremonies were protooled in the *Zodchiy* magazine. (*Zodchiy*, meaning "Architect", was an architecture-oriented journal, printed between 1872 and 1924).

successful Russian artist an entirely different person. It depended almost entirely on the perspective from which the audience tried to find this "Russianness" (imperial or ethnographic). Vereshchagin, as someone not completely included into the Russian institutional art system, leaves an interesting case: he was not "Russian" enough from Russian perspective, but "very Russian" from an international point of view. This issue is further discussed in the following chapters.

## Chapter 1. The "Russian" Vereshchagin?

Vasily Vereshchagin is an example of an artist who was not a part of any institution, but rather, a "self-made man". In a book, remarkably called "An interpretation of the Russian people", the fact that Vereshchagin quit his academic education is highly praised: "Fortunately he had not been connected long enough with the school to have his innate genius corrupted by servile adherence to tradition."<sup>39</sup> The same book remembers another episode of Vereshchagin's biography – his denial of a professorship in the Imperial Academy of Art. He indeed refused the post in 1874, and this is how the book, aiming to interpret the Russians, justifies his decision: "He considered such distinction as of no value to him that preferred to be free in his activity."<sup>40</sup> It is important to mark, how this "freedom" was an identifying category, that included Vereshchagin among the examples of Russians, as representatives of that nation and people. In other literature and press regarding specifically the question of Russianness, his liberty and desire for freedom are emphasized as a trait common to the great, free Russian soul. That category in the context of international reflections excluded the Russian bureaucratic hierarchy and those who were involved in it seemed less representative of the people. In this sense Vereshchagin came in a close association with Leo Tolstoy – both were portrayed as mediators of the true, free, ethnic Russian culture. Feelings rather than social structures were a decisive category for Russian art in a popular British art journal, Macmillan's Magazine: "In the works of these two men [Tolstoy and Vereshchagin], whose subjects are often closely analogous, the weird Russian temperament, visionary, melancholy, sardonic and tinged with a strange fatalism, is a constant factor. In common with many of their compatriots they gaze at life's saddest side, and if they look for compensations it is with the opera-glass reversed."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Wiener, Leo, *An Interpretation of the Russian People*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. P. 84

<sup>41</sup> Macmillan's magazine. The realities of war. V. 62, 431. 1890.

What are the main differences between these two views – one from within the Russian imperial system and the other from abroad? Firstly, the Imperial Academy of Art, being the main reflector of the empire's policy towards what was considered as “national” art, clearly stated the need to be within its hierarchy to be even called officially an artist. This notion influenced not only career opportunities for its graduates (or independent acquirers of the title), but their inclusion in events and ceremonies specific for this category of people within the state-sanctioned corporation. Following their long career as an imperial artist of any kind, if it happened to be successful, commemorative policies took a turn towards glorifying their numerous rewards, trophies and achievements. The person was viewed not only as an artist, but also as a devoted citizen, whose life's work of serving the tsar has now been accomplished in the realm of the artistic career. After his death his family, as it was in all branches of state jobs, continued receiving a pension of his behalf from the organization the deceased artist had worked at (or, in some cases, from the Academy itself), and the obituaries will mention not only the artist's talent, but his civic consciousness and honor, loyalty to his institution and art, Russian, in particular. It is important to note, that in most obituaries the individual's input into world's culture and art would also be noted, and that was the furthest that the internationalism of the Imperial Academy of Art went. While trying to position itself as a world-renown institution with a high influence, the Academy formed a system within which international reach was not possible on full scale – even the long ongoing professional projects were created to intensify and research Russianness within its state, imperial understanding.<sup>42</sup> When it came to Russian art's perception from abroad, this imperial view was only one of possible options, sometimes dominating the field, but sometimes existing as an "umbrella" for anything any Russian artist would create and exhibit.

The look from abroad proves this point and offers an entirely different understanding to what was considered Russian art and who was considered a Russian artist. This is the central research

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<sup>42</sup> For example, in 1871 Lev Dal, a state architect belonging to the Academy, was asked to make a journey to India to research the foundations of Russian style, as India was seen as a possible “ancestor” in this sense. A huge case, reporting on the preparation and the voyage itself, is here: Russian State Historical Archive. F. 798. O. 7. D. 8.

question of this thesis. Both of these notions were perceived from the angle of most common characteristics, aimed to describe “Russian” identity: freedom, some barbarity, nonconformity, savagery, religiosity and sensibility. These stereotypes came through books and researches, aimed to understand Russian people, particularly starting from the 1860s, when the great reforms struck a wave of interest to the country and its people through in an environment with much lessened censorship. They were placed in newspapers and art journals in articles devoted to Russian art and literature. Within that framework the “true” Russian artist was the one that was not a part of any institution of hierarchical system, as it would compromise “freedom”, “liberty of the soul” etc.

These conflicting views on what constituted Russian art (and artists) from within imperial borders and from beyond can help understand how the empire positioned itself in everyday cultural life of its elites, as well as emphasize its closed, restricted character when it came to internationality. The hierarchic system of Imperial Academy of Art and its approach to career development, as well as the events that surrounded a life of an individual within its walls was not meant to create an internationally acknowledged artist, but rather a Russian bureaucrat, a citizen and a “loyal servant”. This image, albeit being popularized in the Russian artistic press and known about abroad, did transmit its understanding to other countries, but often in a rather metaphorical way, closely linked to ethnography and discussions of modernity: imperial patronage was viewed simultaneously as repression, in a way, of the Russian soul, and as a means of showcasing it. This contributed to the conflict of images between imperial and ethnic views on the nature of Russian culture and heritage.

In the case of Vasily Vereshchagin, this was the foundation of conflicting reception of his images, as well as for such a diverse approach to his own image. As an example of this, I shall



look at two of his biographies, both created during his lifetime, thus both being chronologically "imperial".

Vereshchagin's first biography of was written by Vladimir Stasov, and was published in the *Herald of Fine Arts* in 1883.

The peculiarity of this piece of writing comes not inasmuch because the subject of the biography was alive, but in the fact that it became a foundation for further biographical writings on Vereshchagin - a piece that supposedly contained the irrevocable truth about the artist, done with accuracy and precision. Most likely, this unquestionable trust was granted to the piece because of the method Stasov had used: an interview. The author claimed to have gotten all the information from the words of Vereshchagin himself, meaning that, for the reader, Stasov disappears, leaving the "first person" narration to the artist, thus making him a "representative" a program, declared through appropriation of his art.

The goal of Stasov's text was to acquaint the Russian reader with an artist who was perceived not only as very talented, but as someone portraying the main contemporary events of the Russian empire. This biography is in direct dialogue with texts previously published by Vereshchagin: it includes a detailed description of his travels abroad, of his voyages to Central Asia (both as part of the campaign of 1867-1868 and his personal trips), and exhaustive accounts of his experiences there, which closely followed the narratives published by Vereshchagin himself in the 1870s.

Accounts of Vereshchagin's travels are combined together with the ideas of his curiosity to see Central Asia in the first place, and to acquire further artistic skills. Along the same lines as the artist, Stasov speaks of the Central Asian mission in an orientalizing way, noting the barbarous nature of that region. He, however, does not extend it to a broader discussion of colonial topics

(as Vereshchagin himself did in, for example, British press), or questions of international relations in the concerned area (i.e., Russian supposed threats to British India due to Russian presence in the region). It was not unusual to speak about these issues when talking about people who took part in such campaigns. In most international texts on Vereshchagin (even as small as newspaper announcements for his upcoming exhibitions) his persona was often connected with global international politics, and viewed as a metaphor for representing Russia.

Stasov, on the contrary, does not go global in Vereshchagin's biography. The image of a person that the reader got from that text was consistent with the representation model that Vereshchagin at the time chose for himself: that of painter, a soldier and a traveller. Furthermore, Vereshchagin's success as an artist is presented as being due to the events of the Russian empire of the time. In that image, Vereshchagin is bound by his experience to Russian politics, such as colonizing missions or war, and, essentially, the artist was realistically portraying those events in images through state commissions (at first). Despite the governmental character of those first commissions, the paintings were not pathetic in nature, not glorifying the empire in any way. This paradigm was in accordance with Stasov's understanding of a national approach to art, which made this sort of almost photographic realism a form of civil duty. His biography of Vereshchagin is a biography of a man who was performing such duty through art.

The second biography, that can be viewed as a stepping stone in Vereshchagin's institutionalized image was written in 1896 by Fyodor Bulgakov.<sup>43</sup> Bulgakov was Vereshchagin's friend. He was an art historian and a journalist. In the 1880s, he started working with the Imperial Academy of Arts, writing and publishing biographies of various artists. One of his most prominent works was a book titled "Our Artists" which was a comprehensive, two-volume collection of biographies of Russian artists active through the history of the Academy, so, in the years between 1764 and

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<sup>43</sup> Bulgakov F.I. *Vasily Vasilievich Vereshchagin i ego proizvedeniia*. [Vasiy Vasilievich Vereshchagin and His Art]. Saint Petersburg, 1896.

1889. He had published separate biographies of some artists, such as Ivan Aivazovsky, Konstantin Makovsky, Ivan Shishkin, and, of course, Vasily Vereshchagin.

That biography, to contrast Stasov's, which was published in a journal, came out as a separate book, and was printed twice, the first time in 1896, and the second - in 1905, soon after Vereshchagin's death.

This biography was the first to introduce an explicitly stated mission behind Vereshchagin's art - showing the horrors of war, preaching humanism through art and realism, regardless of how unpatriotic or cruel such images can appear. This motive will become central for Vereshchagin's figure and his art, but it contradicts the narrative created by Vereshchagin himself previously, in the 1870s-early 1880s, according to which war was pronounced by a necessary, civilizing measure, horrifying, but justifiable. The images, of course, remained the same through the ages - it was the textual coverage of them that was transforming. Vereshchagin's images cannot be used to illustrate his texts (and vice versa).

Bulgakov's method is not an interview, contrary to Stasov - he collects the materials through archives, he constantly quotes letters and articles written by Vereshchagin himself, and articles in international press on him. Bulgakov is constantly in dialogue with European art criticism and what they have been writing on Vereshchagin within the European context and trends. As Bulgakov himself states, the purpose of all those materials is to explain Vereshchagin's artistic activity and the originality of his personality.<sup>44</sup>

This biography is very structured: the book has separate sections on Vereshchagin's childhood and education, on his travels and exhibitions and, finally, includes two of the artist's texts on the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 8

role of realism and progress in art. Thus, this biography, besides being a description of Vereshchagin's life, is a constructed narrative of an artist who is, at the same time, a "prophet". The artist's early life is portrayed with the help of Stasov's biography, and all Vereshchagin's travel and war experience is recounted through the published texts of the artist. Bulgakov's contribution to the narrative is in detailed analysis of international press, especially the issues past 1883, where Stasov's biography stops. That analysis addresses not the life of Vereshchagin, or even his art, but rather his political and philosophical opinions on nihilism, nature of war and religion. The texts authored by Vereshchagin himself, which Bulgakov included, are, perhaps, illustrating those opinions, as, for example, the text on realism speaks about the categories of truth in art, about the artist's role in transmitting the moral truth through images that look as realistic and accurate to the "real event" as possible, and ends with the challenge that realism brings to an ever-growing socialist movement. Realism, according to Vereshchagin, was an artistic method that reflected modern understanding of the world and progress, and thus held the ultimate aesthetic, educational and moral capital of art, which socialism, as a movement driven by poverty and mass, has no appreciation for.

These biographies - both Stasov's and Bulgakovs - are closely connected to the same conceptual problems that the exhibitions of 1869, 1873 and 1874 can raise, such as the place the artist holds in the imperial diplomacy. It is evident through these sources, that the paintings' perception and appreciation is connected to the political situation of the time, which is expressed through texts, rather than through images. As an artist, Vereshchagin acknowledged that very well, as did his biographers.

## **Chapter 2. Turkestan in pictures: Vereshchagin's exhibitions in Saint Petersburg (1869) and London (1873)**

In April of 1873, an exhibition of Vereshchagin's paintings opened in the Crystal Palace in London. By that time, Vereshchagin had already exhibited his series on Turkestan in Saint Petersburg, directly after his voyage to Central Asia in 1867-1868. That exhibition was organized and sponsored by General von Kaufmann<sup>45</sup>, and took place in the Ministry of State Domains. It was ethnographic in design, acquainting the viewer with newly conquered territories, and Vereshchagin's paintings and sketches were merely some of the attractions, among collections of local minerals, stuffed animals, costumes and artifacts. This, as will become clear, is important to highlight for two reasons: historiography and public perception.

In the historiographical tradition, constructed both by imperial and, later, Soviet scholars, Vereshchagin's adherence to the state structure is portrayed in two polar ways - he had been viewed either in collaboration with the imperial state apparatus, or in striking opposition to it under the guise of pacifism. His participation in an imperial ethnographic exhibition, directly organized to showcase the results of Russian Central Asian expedition, can serve as a combat for both points. On the one hand, Vereshchagin, as David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye stated, never disapproved of Russian colonizing mission, and, as far as some of his accounts show, condoned the violent measures that such process would entail.<sup>46</sup> However, one must always keep in mind that for an artist who was not a part of the state-supported structure of artistic education and activity, such events provided a platform for exhibiting his work, a possibility for further professional recognition and financing. It is not by mere chance that his further stay abroad for the duration of three years was also funded by the Russian state. He was working on a

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<sup>45</sup> Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufmann (1818-1882) was the first Governor-General of Russian Turkestan. As a General, he was in charge of the Russian campaign in Central Asia in the late 1860s-1870s. In 1868 Vereshchagin was with Kaufmann's troops during the capture of Samarkand.

<sup>46</sup> An example of placing Vereshchagin into the orientalism discourse with an extensive and long analysis can be found in this book in chapter 4: Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye, David. *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*. Yale University Press, 2010.

commission from general Kaufmann, and was charged with creating oil paintings from his sketches of the campaign. These issues that an artist would face, especially in a difficult financial situation (Vereshchagin came from a land-owning gentry family that, however, went bankrupt following the peasant liberation in 1861), must be regarded alongside the ideological claims, which are common in most historiographical approaches to Vereshchagin and his contemporaries.

The exhibition of 1873 is rather often quoted as an example of Russian orientalism in the understanding of Edward Said. The approach that researchers in the field, such as Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, take when studying this exhibition, comes from the presupposition that a certain Russian orientalizing program was a certainty both for the Russian empire, for Britain and, most importantly, for Vereshchagin himself, as well as his audience. This is why the questions usually posed towards this particular exhibition were to what extent did it portray the Russian colonial plans for the Central Asian region, or did it portray them at all. This is also the premise of a PhD dissertation<sup>47</sup> by Natasha Medvedev, defended on this topic. Her research is focused on the contradictions between Vereshchagin's various depictions of the Russian Orient. By contradictions, the author defines an evident gap between empathy towards others and pacifism, attributed to Vereshchagin both by his contemporaries (and, importantly, by himself), and his non less evident orientalizing approach towards the depiction of the "other" - the population of Central Asia.

These two main historiographical sources, which I am addressing numerous times throughout this thesis (primarily - for a very substantial study of the sources on Vereshchagin, conducted by

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<sup>47</sup> With research on Russian Orientalism touching his Turkestan series, the central question it usually poses is whether or not a particular model of understanding Orientalism applies to him. An example of this is this PhD dissertation: Natasha Medvedev, *The Contradictions in Vereshchagin's Turkestan Series: Visualizing the Russian Empire and its Others* (University of California, 2009); see also – Elena Krylova, “Pervye Vystavki Sredneaziatskikh Rabot V.V. Vereshchagina v Periodicheskoi Pechati I Problema Interpretatsii Proizvedenii Turkestanskogo Tsykla” [First Exhibitions of Vasily Vereshchagin's Artwork in Periodic Press and Problems of Interpretation of the Turkestan Series], *Znanie, Ponimanie, Umenie* (2015): 335-342.

both authors) both enter Vereshchagin into the same debate on Russian realism, studying its application in practice by the state through, in this case, visual culture and art. This endows Vereshchagin with a position of an intermediary of the Russian state, giving his art undoubted - and intentional - orientalizing imperial program, viewing his Turkestan series as a unified, solid piece of a message.

While this approach is very well formulated, but is credible mainly through the prism of post-colonial studies and orientalism. One must presuppose the existence of a unified program of the Russian empire of the time to nurture the visual orientalizing program in order to prove this argument. And, while this program did indeed exist (evident through the ways the colonization of Central Asia and the Russification of its population was conducted)<sup>48</sup>, the argument needs to establish Vereshchagin's place within this paradigm in order to endow him and his Turkestan images with the kind of state agency that would support a reading of Vereshchagin's work as an expression of orientalist, imperial designs.

However, this kind of agency is not so clear in Vereshchagin's work because of the dynamic changes in Vereshchagin's life, and the changing roles the same images continued to play over the years. They have been endowed - by the artist himself and by the audience - with a variety of meanings, ranging from images being a tribute to colonialism, expressions of ethnographic curiosity, all the way to these same images proselytizing pacifism, which became the marker of Vereshchagin's art in the 1890s. This means that while an orientalist reading of Vereshchagin's work on Central Asian themes is possible, it can only be one among many other interpretations, and an orientalizing gaze is not the main motivation behind his oeuvre.

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<sup>48</sup> For information on Russification of this region see: Miller, Alexei. I. *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism: Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research*. Central European University Press. 2008.

I propose a different approach towards Vereshchagin's portrayal of Russian Turkestan advances: while viewing the series as, indeed, a part of the same project, which was sponsored by the Russian state and used for its purposes both in Russia and abroad, I suggest viewing the series within the context of their further existence. This requires assessing the series through the culture of the exhibitions where they were shown, as well as side by side with the texts that imminently followed the paintings. While this is not the aim of this thesis and this chapter, I highlight this perspective to explain that I see the London exhibition as a unique event, which was embedded in the specific realities of its time and location (rather than emerging from a general orientalist discourse). Studying the London exhibition provides answers to the questions of both Vereshchagin's imperial agency the public perception of his works by audiences in rivaling imperial capital. This approach also helps to underline the reciprocal relations between texts, art, and the political affiliation of the artist.

There are various reasons why British exhibitions, as events, provide insightful case studies for analyzing the international perception of Russian art in general, and Vereshchagin's activities in particular. Firstly, British artistic life of the time was very well publicized. Most newspapers provided a column devoted to artistic events, such as exhibitions, performances or lectures, and published interviews, which the artists gave.<sup>49</sup> This provided a platform for intense critical appreciation of any objects exhibited, and it can be traced in contemporary press: British reports on exhibitions were not only meticulously detailed, but also quite often original - whereas continental press outlets often reprinted each other.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, the British political agenda, as expressed in the media, resonated very sharply with the Russian one. In the 1860s-1870s both empires were highly concerned with colonial expansion, as well as with the pursuit for a constructed cultural public image. With the Russian and British empires being in a state of

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<sup>49</sup> By "interview" I mean a genre slightly different from today's "questions and answers" format. It was usually a coherent textual piece that was a commentary of the interviewee, but always in dialogue with the reporter.

<sup>50</sup> See: Altick, Richard D. *The English common reader : a social history of the mass reading public, 1800-1900*. Ohio State University Press, 1998.



rivalry (with Britain being in particular concern over Russian advances in Central Asia being a threat to the Indies), the situation of media coverage of exhibitions is ever more peculiar, as Britain not merely provided a platform for Russian artists, but engaged in a form of a dialogue, where the artist was unquestionably a representative of the Russian empire. This is very well documented through both newspapers and media directly produced for the purposes of exhibition - catalogues, reviews, and was even repeated in books on Russian culture, Russianness and various art bulletins.

Further in the thesis, I analyze the conflict that arose in Vienna in 1885, when the Catholic authorities condemned Vereshchagin for his portrayal of biblical episodes. The accusers - the Catholic Cardinal and a Scottish monk - traced the reason for his "blasphemous" images to Vereshchagin's Russian provenance. It is important to note a stark contrast between this situation and the one in Vienna. There, the relationship between the artist, his art, and the state was debatable. One can only assume how honest Vereshchagin himself was when he questioned the severity of an international conflict and his role in it in his letters and newspaper statements. In the British empire, however, all parties knew rather well, that an exhibition here is not merely an artistic event as such, it is also a platform to showcase imperial international agenda for all parties. In Vienna, the relationship between the figure of the artist, the imperial and the ethnic component had to be negotiated. In London, that relationship was unquestionable.

This certainty about the agency the artist and his work had came from the culture of international exhibitions, which was rooted very deeply in British cultural life. The original Great Exhibition of 1851 was designed as a showcase of every country.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This paradigm had been well researched based on the concept of a "nation on display": Kaiser, Wolfram. "Cultural Transfer of Free Trade at the World Exhibitions, 1851–1862." *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 3 (September 2005): 563-90; Swift, Anthony. "Russia and the Great Exhibition of 1851: Representations, Perceptions, and a Missed Opportunity." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 55, no. 2 (2007): 242-63.

The Crystal Palace exhibition, then, was not singular occurrence: it was one of the three events showcasing Russian missions in Central Asia. These three exhibitions took place over the span of five years: in 1869, 1873 and 1874, and each of them was aimed at establishing certain political or diplomatic claims. As stated before, the ethnographic nature of the exhibition of 1869, held in Saint Petersburg, made Vereshchagin's paintings merely a part of the display. In 1873 in London, on the contrary, the exhibition was devoted exclusively to his images. And, in a circular manner, the final exhibition of this cycle was held in Saint Petersburg again, and was, this time, also devoted entirely to Vereshchagin. In the context of this chapter, the focus will be on the exhibitions of 1869 and 1873, with the former one being the precursor to the latter.

The goals of these two exhibitions differed, even though the two events were connected to each other. While both of them were organized through support of the Russian imperial government, the one in Saint Petersburg aimed to glorify and bring attention to Russian Central Asian mission. It was a showcase for the appropriation of the region, conveyed through scientific research, collection of materials from the location, and anthropological studies of the population. Vereshchagin's sketches, that portrayed different types of local personalities, helped with that purpose of putting the newly conquered region on display. The military pictures, done with almost photographic realism, were there to show the suffering of the Russian army from the cruelty of the local "barbarians". These images were there to justify the losses that had happened during the campaign.

Interestingly, in the main Soviet biography of Vereshchagin, this exhibition is portrayed as a personal event, created by his initiative to portray the social problems of Turkestan. Andrei Lebedev, the author of this biography, praises Vereshchagin for his approach towards the portrayal of these regions through comparisons with other artists who had visited these lands and had done sketches and paintings there, as well. Here is an example of such comparison:

A year or two before Vereshchagin's first voyage to Turkestan, another young artist went there to make art. It was Dmitry Vasilievich Velezhev, who had just finished the Academy of Arts in Petersburg. He followed approximately the same itinerary as Vereshchagin, and created a large number of etudes and pictures, depicting views of Central Asian towns and monuments. <...> These are beautiful pictures, created masterfully and truthfully. With knowledge of perspective they convey the appearance of Turkestan populated areas and nature, but fail to give any impression of the public life of people, of their customs. Often they depict the figures of people as mere staffage, they are there to liven up the streets or squares. From these images one can learn nothing about the secluded life of the Central Asian woman, hidden underneath the paranja, about poverty of the population, about slavery and other sores [*yazy*] of public life in Turkestan, so boldly exhibited in the Vereshchagin's works.<sup>52</sup>

Lebedev also emphasizes here, that the exhibition was entirely Vereshchagin's idea, rather than it being organized by the Russian state.<sup>53</sup> While Vereshchagin played an active role in organizing his own participation in the exhibition, just like any other artist interested in displaying his work would be, it was general Kaufmann, who was the head of the military campaign to Central Asia, who was the driving force in organizing the event.

Vereshchagin's participation in the exhibition was very successful: firstly, he had obtained a grant from the Russian government to cover his stay abroad, during which he was supposed to paint a series of larger paintings about the campaign to exhibit them in 1874 in the imperial capital. Secondly, this exhibition landed him a prospect of a future one in London in 1873 through an acquaintance with Edward Delmar Morgan, a British explorer and linguist, who had lived in Saint Petersburg at that time. He attended the exhibition in 1869, and was among the curators four years later. He maintained a friendly relationship with Vereshchagin, and currently their correspondence is kept in the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

Delmar's curatorship of the British exhibition can be viewed as an instrument of international diplomacy between the two empires. Arranged after the exhibition in Saint Petersburg of 1869, it was portraying the diplomacy of trans-imperial colonial entanglement: the London event was

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<sup>52</sup> Lebedev, 87.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

designed not to highlight Russian interest in colonization, but rather to show the common cause of the Russian and the British empires together in the region of poignant mutual conflict.<sup>54</sup> Delmar coordinated the British event, which has drastically switched its accent from the Russian one, held four years previously.

As stated above, despite the attempts of Soviet art historiography to appropriate the exhibition to present it as a form of Vereshchagin's statement for exposing the injustices of Central Asia, the Saint Petersburg event itself was, for the most part, ethnographic. The point of such an showcase was the demonstration of the appropriation of the newly conquered lands. Part of this process was the justification of colonization through an image of the barbarous locals, that had to be "civilized" by the West. In Russian official self-definition that came from the state and institutions, the Russian empire was western, and that contrast was built visually - and culturally - through events like these exhibitions.<sup>55</sup> This was the link that connected the event of 1869 in Saint Petersburg with the following Crystal Palace exhibition: in London, the main idea, around which the concept of the showcase was built, was the need for barbarian people to be civilized.<sup>56</sup> This message was reconciling both empires in a very discreet way: they were not rivaling powers, guarding each others' advances in the neighboring regions, posing as a threat to each others' colonial policies. On the contrary, the exhibition in London was expressing a message of a common goal for both Russia and Britain, which was the civilizing mission in those lands. To sum up, one can say, that through this exhibition one empire was legitimizing the advances of the other, while showing the public the global scale of the issue.

This practical premise of the exhibition in London was stated by Vereshchagin himself in the introduction to the most important document of any exhibition - its catalogue. There, he wrote,

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<sup>54</sup> Medvedev, 180.

<sup>55</sup> This phenomena is analyzed thoroughly in Iver Neumann's book: Neumann, Iver B. *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation*. Manchester University Press, 1998. See chapter "The Russian Other".

<sup>56</sup> Medvedev, 182

that the paintings were displayed to "assist in dispelling the distrust of the English public towards their natural friends and neighbors in Central Asia."<sup>57</sup> The main aim of the event, according to the artist, was showing that Russia was not posing any threat to the British in the region. On the contrary, Russia's advances in Central Asia were beneficial for the area, and they were comparable to Britain's progress in the East Indies. In the preface to the catalogue, Vereshchagin stated: "The Central Asian population's barbarism is so glaring, its economic and social condition so degraded, that the sooner European civilization penetrates into the land, whether from one side or the other, the better."<sup>58</sup> This reconciling assertion of any form of colonial expansion - Russian or British alike - was a display of diplomacy through art, which legitimized Russian conquering mission through a British platform. Civilization was portrayed as a universal mission; thus, neither empire was a threat to the other in it. At least, in the public display in the Crystal Palace. This was the statement of Russian foreign policy and, expressed by Vereshchagin, it undoubtedly made him a representative of this policy and of the empire.

These two exhibitions can showcase several points. Firstly, his images should be viewed differently according to the circumstances surrounding their portrayal. In this sense, his depictions of Central Asia, traditionally called the "Turkestan Series", while being a complete set of paintings, created around the same theme, should not be viewed as a unified product. The role of the images in each case was different: in Saint Petersburg they were exhibited in a position of trophies, whereas in London they were instruments of Russian international diplomacy, and engaged in dialogue with the audience of Great Britain as intermediaries of the Russian colonial message. Secondly, the former observation places the artist in a context of undoubted imperial affiliation. In this sense, the Soviet manipulation with the image of Vereshchagin is very clear: the artist, despite the formation of his image as a pacifist, civic-minded democratic oppositionist to the tsarist regime, can hardly be considered as one, particularly through the texts that he

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<sup>57</sup> Wereschagin, Basil. *Sketches of Central Asia. Exhibited in the Loan Gallery at Crystal Palace. London, 1873.* 2.

<sup>58</sup> Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye, David. *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration.* Yale University Press, 2010, chapter 4.

himself wrote about his trips to Central Asia, his participation in military campaign there, and, finally, on the nature of Russian colonization in general.

One of the most internationally valuable texts of his time was Vereshchagin's memoirs, published in 1873 in the French journal *Le Tour du Monde*.<sup>59</sup> In this travelogue, he describes the people of Central Asia as people who desperately needed to be ruled by the Russian empire. While depicting the horrors of war, brought by the campaign of 1867-1868, he also accentuated the necessity of such measures. In such texts, Vereshchagin places Russia into the broader European scene, highlighting the nature of their alliance in their approach to the colonial progression. But in Russian journals Vereshchagin did not abstain from creating an image of the barbarous "enemies". Take, for example, this piece from his memoirs, published in a Russian historical journal *Russkaia Starina* [The Russian Past] in 1888:

On the very throne of Tamerlane I discovered an entire family of Jews. <...> There were many of them, and, with the arrival of Russians, they became very self-assured, began to wear sashes instead of ropes, started to ride horses and other things, which were strictly forbidden for them to do before, and for which they would certainly have been killed, had they stayed in the city. <...> Other than Jews, there were also Persians, Indians, Tatars. All of this [sic!] (*vsyo eto*), upon our entrance, began to question us, thanked us, kissed the hems of our clothes.<sup>60</sup>

Here, in a text aimed for a Russian audience, Vereshchagin creates a picture of Russia as a savior even of the utmost undeserving peoples - Jews, Persians, Tatars. Russian civilizing missions, through his account, benefited everyone - Russia, the "barbarians" - thus, the locals, and other ethnic groups that were subordinate to them in the area. Notice the dehumanizing language that Vereshchagin uses - he calls the crowds of minorities, apparently, liberated by the Russian army (hence the kissing of the hems rhetoric), in the Russian inanimate form of "it".

<sup>59</sup> Vereschaguine, Basile, "*Voyage dans l'Asie centrale: D'Orembourg à Samarcande*". *Le tour du monde* 25 (1873): 193–272.

<sup>60</sup> Vereshchagin, Vasilii. *Samarkand v 1868 g. Iz vospominanii khudozhnika V.V. Vereshchagina*. [Samarkand in 1868. From the memoirs of the painter V.V. Vereshchagin]. *Russkaia Starina*, №59, 1888. 631.

In his artwork, the Russian mission was portrayed as a bloody military campaign, undoubtedly cruel. Depending on the context of the exhibition, these paintings can be seen as showing another message: as a necessary evil in order to bring European - or purely Russian - progress to the area, which would be a salvation for everyone involved. The textual commentary that Vereshchagin gave surrounding these military campaigns prove this point and shows, that the initial perception of the "Turkestan Series" was meant to be achieved through the discussion about Russian imperial expansions, and, in turn, be used in the international diplomatic arena.

This discussion is important, because it demonstrates the power that visual arts had, and the way an artist was able to become a political representative of empire. In a certain sense, this can be approached as a case of Russian cultural diplomacy, but with a slight difference: while cultural diplomacy can be defined as a conglomerate of measures, applied to create a positive image of a country abroad, and administered by foreign policy institutions, the role of Vereshchagin's art in London was to exercise direct agency and present the foreign policy of the Russian empire through cultural association.

It is important to note the fluidity of this narrative. The exhibition in London in 1873 brought the initial popularity and international reputation to Vereshchagin. The following exhibition, held in 1874 in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Saint Petersburg, gave the artist strong Russian recognition. Thus, for the rest of his artistic life, the Turkestan series were the ones for which he remained most known for. This colonial narrative began to lose his actuality in the following decades, and later became conceptualized together with another grand military series of Vereshchagin - his controversial paintings on the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. The conceptualization of these exhibitions can be traced through the development of Vereshchagin's biographies of imperial time.

### **Chapter 3. Imperial actors: an analysis of two reactions to the exhibition of Vasily Vereshchagin in Vienna in 1885.**

Vasily Vereshchagin can be seen as an artist who, due to various themes touched in his works, is often included into discourses on various topics. Both contemporaries and historians have viewed his life and his actions as controversial. What is not clear to this day is how he himself controlled these narratives, and whether he controlled them at all.

When one sets out to study Vereshchagin and his art, the immediate issue that arises is an abundance of texts surrounding his persona. These include pieces written by the artist himself, interviews that he had given both in Russia and abroad, his biographies, materials left by art critics, catalogue descriptions, etc. Combined with a very large number of paintings with a strong ideological subject matter - war, imperial colonial advance, religious images, ethnography - these materials have been traditionally viewed as evidence of various discourses within the studies on late Russian empire.<sup>61</sup> For example, as stated in the previous chapter, Vereshchagin is always included in studies of Russian orientalism, and even called an “orientalist painter par excellence”.<sup>62</sup> However, the conclusion can never place him on any side of the debate (i.e., whether he indeed was an orientalist and viewed the Russian empire’s Central Asia conquest in a “Saidian” way” or not).<sup>63</sup> The main problem is that the researchers plunge into studying the sources left by the artist (and about him written by others) without consideration of the context in which those sources were produced. The connection between text and image and the adherence to a specific storyline seems to prevail, and the sources themselves that ultimately shape it get

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<sup>61</sup> Some of such discourses are: Orientalism in the Russian empire, civilization and barbarism, imperial agency of artists, ethnography studies, promotion of imperial expansion.

<sup>62</sup> An example of placing Vereshchagin into the orientalism discourse with an extensive and long analysis can be found in Oye, David Schimmelpenninck, Van Der. *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*. Yale University Press, 2010, chapter 4.

<sup>63</sup> In Russian studies, there is a debate between Adeeb Khalid and Nathaniel Knight on whether or not Russian Orientalism fits the model proposed by Said. Knight, Nathaniel. "Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?" *Slavic Review*, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 74-100.; Khalid, Adeeb. "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 4 (2000): 691-99.



either lost or serve as building blocks for a narrative, usually, a biographic one. For example, Vereshchagin published many texts regarding Central Asia not only a few years after his participation in the conquest, but in foreign journals, such as *Le Tour du Monde*, and had considerably more lengthy accounts than similar ones published by him in Russia.<sup>64</sup> In his time (during the 1870-1880s) Russian censorship cannot be entirely blamed for this – in 1863 censorship had become post-publishing rather than preventive, and, besides, accounts emphasizing Russia's civilizing missions in the East would not conflict with the imperial administration, which organized exhibitions and publications to celebrate it. This is a vivid example of how the overarching idea of Vereshchagin promoting orientalism, when examined in sources beyond those printed in Russia, brings up more questions than answers and completely overshadows the artist himself, as well as his surroundings. The texts could accompany the images, they could also have been produced separately, but what is undeniable is that Vereshchagin was an artist densely surrounded by texts, including by texts about him written by others.

The example of Orientalism is perhaps the most evident one to illustrate the importance of viewing the texts surrounding Vereshchagin as results of actions of specific people, each representing certain interests. These people could be publishers, art critics, exhibition directors and, of course, imperial authorities. This paper is an attempt to analyze a rather understudied case of the artist's life, using two sources produced as a reaction to an exhibition in Vienna in 1885 in which he took part.

In 1885-1886 a series of moving exhibitions were due to take place in Berlin, Budapest, Vienna, Paris and London – the same cities and venues used before. The artwork that was about to be demonstrated was also of a similar kind – in fact, many paintings have been shown before. The

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<sup>64</sup> Similar accounts of the conquest have also been published in parts in *Russkaia Starina*, a historical journal, in Russian, in 1888. See issues 59-62, consequently, from that year.

Palestine Sketches, which formed a minor part of the exhibition, were not the only provocative ones. They were placed near a series called “The Trilogy of Executions”, showing two methods of modern-day capital punishments next to Crucifixion. The first method was Russian – hanging. The second – British, showing Indian rebels being executed by being shot out of canons. Unsurprisingly, these images have stricken quiet a reaction in London. In Vienna, however, the main attention was focused on two particular paintings from the Palestine Sketches: *Resurrection* and *The Holy Family*.

Both paintings were created in a positivist way of viewing Christianity and Jesus in particular – he is portrayed as a human without any trace of divinity. In *The Holy Family* Christ is sitting on the edge of a very poor courtyard, with his family surrounding him doing daily chores, and his siblings playing. He even holds some piece of paper in his hands to read. *Resurrection* is also depicted in a highly realistic manner – Jesus is quiet literally climbing out of the tomb, making the guards to run in fear and shock. Images like these could be viewed as undoubtedly blasphemous, and they were. However, they were not the only case of “pictorial blasphemy”, as J. Gatrall calls these sorts of images.<sup>65</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century Europe and Russia had seen a generous pictorial construction of Jesus’s “portrait”. Numerous artists offered a new image of Christ and biblical history depiction in general, controversial on some levels and accepted on the other. However, the question of how these new positivist images of Jesus were integrated into the national (or ethnic, or religious) narratives of the countries (or regions, or territories) where they were produced and – in some cases more importantly – exhibited, remains. This case in particular demonstrates how virtually a nationally neutral Jesus image can be put in the center of the construct of threat from one great empire to the other.

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<sup>65</sup> On this, see: Gatrall, Jefferson J. *The Real and the Sacred: Picturing Jesus in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. University of Michigan Press. 2014.

Following the development of the allegations from the cardinal, it is clear that from the start it was not just an accusation of blasphemy. Cardinal feared for the reaction of his flock in a different sense than just their religious beliefs. He stated, that Catholics are especially receptive to images, and the exhibition would “give the press an excuse to reflect on those obscene images” and it was his direct duty to “protect the believers from the attack”.<sup>66</sup> Which attack precisely was he talking about? One of the possible answers can be “Russianness”. In the press releases following the event (in Vienna, Paris, Berlin and London) Vereshchagin’s affiliation with the country he was from was always stated first and foremost. The notion that he was “Russian painter”, “peintre russe” or “Russische Maler” was his primary identification.<sup>67</sup> That was supposed to dictate the way his art should be perceived. Great Britain was, by the way, the only country that spoke of the paintings from the Vienna exhibition from an aesthetic point of view (with the analysis of whether Vereshchagin’s art was beautiful or not). The French, Viennese and German press paid closer attention to national contexts into which the images can be placed. Those contexts can be categorized by being the following: antagonism between Orthodoxy and Catholicism; ethnical association of Orthodoxy with Russianness, thus equalizing Orthodox threat with the Russian threat; Jewish or Polish discourses in relation to art; panslavism. Those discourses blossomed around the exhibition, and even resulted in acts of violence towards the paintings (they were splashed by acid)<sup>68</sup> and the artist himself. In a letter to his wife Vereshchagin said, that he replaced his revolver to his inner pocket to always have easy access to it in case of need.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Cölestin Joseph Cardinal Ganglbauer Fürst Erzbischof. Protest gegen Wereschagin’s in Künstlerhaus zu Wien ausstellte Gemälde “Die Heilige Familie” und “Die Auferstehung Christi”. Wiener Diözesanblatt, №21, 1885. P. 242-243.

<sup>67</sup> Examples of such statements can be found in newspapers of various countries, for example, here: L’infame tableau. La Croix, 19 Novembre 1885. P. 3.; L’Univers. 16 Novembre 1886. P. 1.; Jules Claretti. Vereschagin. Le Figaro, 28 decembre 1879. P. 230.

<sup>68</sup> Besides the newspapers, a short description of the episode can be found in one of Vereshchagins posthumous biographies: Bulgakov F.I. *Vasily Vereshchagin i ego proizvedeniia* я. СПб., 1905. [Bulgakov F.I. V. Vereshchagin and his artwork]

<sup>69</sup> *Vereshchagin V.V.. Izbrannyye pisma. [Vereshchagin V.V. Selected letters]*. P. 141-142.

In October 1885 Vasily Vereshchagin's exhibition was opened in Vienna in the Künstlerhaus. This event was highly publicized, with announcements featured in newspapers with various political affiliations. By then, the painter had gained an international reputation. He had lived in Paris for the majority of his time, was prominent in European intellectual circles (for example, Ferenc Liszt was familiar with his paintings and invited his brother, who had accidentally met the composer in Budapest during the exhibition trip, for dinner at his home), and had held a few exhibitions in Europe, as well as a single-man exhibition in the Crystal Palace in London in 1873.<sup>70</sup> One of the premises of the exhibition was to showcase a new series of paintings – the so-called Palestine sketches, created after Vereshchagin's travels to the Holy Land in 1883-1884. These paintings used a positivist scientific approach to biblical history, depicting Jesus as a human being, not a Son of God. This triggered the reaction of Viennese Catholic cardinal Cölestin Joseph Ganglbauer, who released a statement in the *Wiener Diözesanblatt*, where he not only charged Vereshchagin with blasphemy, but also classified him as a threat to Austrian Catholic society on the grounds of the artist being Russian.<sup>71</sup>

It is important to note that the reception of Vereshchagin's exhibitions is rooted in ways installations were perceived in Europe at the time in general, as well as what the role the national affiliation of an artist (Russian, in this case) would be in those events. International exhibitions were not usually mounted for art's sake – they were in conversation with social, political and international events, and this conversation was usually articulated in catalogues.<sup>72</sup> With the establishment of the culture of Great Exhibitions, World Fairs, and travelling exhibitions, art was as much of a “newspaper” sphere as the newspapers were themselves<sup>73</sup>. Just to give an example,

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<sup>70</sup> The episode is described in the memoirs of Vereshchagin's brother: Alexandr Vasilievich Vereshchagin. *Za granitsei. Vospominaniya I rasskazy.* [Abroad. Memoires and stories]. Saint-Petersburg, 1895.

<sup>71</sup> Cölestin Joseph Cardinal Ganglbauer Fürst Erzbischof. Protest gegen Wereschagin's in Künstlerhaus zu Wien ausstellte Gemälde “Die Heilige Familie” und “Die Auferstehung Christi”. [Wiener] *Diözesanblatt*, №21, 1885. P. 242-243.

<sup>72</sup> Swift, Anthony. "Russia and the Great Exhibition of 1851: Representations, Perceptions, and a Missed Opportunity." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, no. 2 (2007): 242-63.

<sup>73</sup> Dianina, Katia. *When Art Makes News: Writing Culture and Identity in Late Imperial Russia, 1851–1900*. Orthern Illinois University Press, 2013.

Vereshchagin was the first man to have had a single-man exhibition in the Crystal Palace in London in 1873. The paintings he was showing were about Russian Central Asia, and the preface to the catalogue – written by the artist – was devoted to addressing the British anxiety over Russian expansion close to British India, thus representing Russian imperial interest. The notion of an artist impersonating empire is not new, but in this scenario the artist becomes an actor that engages in political dialogue not only through his art, but also through printed media.

The prominence of artists (sculptors, painters, etc.) engaging in the media in that particular time is important to consider. A theory is that at the time the texts played a role no less important than the paintings in perception and analysis of images.<sup>74</sup> This elevates the importance of texts about art, and gives the ability to analyze them as genres of their own, engaging in conversations with each other.

This chapter looks at two documents produced at the moment of the scandal regarding accusations in blasphemy in 1885. One of them is a catalogue of the images of the Holy Land present at the exhibition<sup>75</sup>, and the other – a brochure against Vereshchagin, written by a monk of the Scottish monastery, Constantin Vidmar.<sup>76</sup> Both documents are from November 1885, and should be viewed in conversation with each other for the following reasons. They both hold a description of a specific part of the exhibition, and are similar in their approach – the catalogue in the form of a list and short descriptions of Vereshchagin's Palestinian paintings, and the pamphlet – in form of a characterization of the works shown. Both are ideologically motivated, and may seem quiet as documents of the same sort. What brings these documents in comparison is the difference – the genre and the role of their authors, who differ by educational background

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Also, another book analyzing the cases in a slightly earlier period in imperial Russia: Maiorova, Olga. *From the Shadow of Empire : Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855-1870*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.

<sup>75</sup> Neumann, Wilhelm. A. *Wereschagin's Palästina-Bilder Und Sein Katalog von Prof. Dr. W.A. Neumann*. Vienna: L. Maher & Comp., 1885.

<sup>76</sup> Vidmar, Constantin J. *Exegetisch-apologetischer Vortrag über Die Durch Wereschagin's Blasphemische Bilder Angeföhrte Glaubenslehre*. Vienna, 1885.

and their chosen ways of reflecting on the exhibition. The tropes that they both produce when evaluating are, on the other hand, quite similar, which allows seeing an attempt of forming social understanding of imperial entanglements between the Habsburg and the Romanov empires on different levels by contemporaries.

This exhibition was a part of Vereshchagin's itinerary – it was to be held in Berlin, Vienna, Paris and London. The opening in Berlin had been rather uneventful, especially given the fact that the artist had exhibited his usual series: depictions of Russian Central Asia conquest in 1867-1868, scenes from Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, ethnographic sketches, Indian landscapes, sketches from his travel to the Russian-Chinese borders and to Japan, as well as some newer pieces – the “Trilogy of executions”, featuring death of revolts at the canons in British India, the crucifixion and the hanging in Russia, as well as the so-called “Palestinian series”. This last one contained mostly landscape pictures of Vereshchagin's trip to Palestine in 1883-1884, as well as some paintings depicting scenes of life of Christ. Two of these paintings had triggered the Viennese cardinal Cölestin Joseph Ganglebauer, who wrote the article condemning Vereshchagin for blasphemy. This scandal had been closely followed by European media, although for quite a short period of time (by the end of winter or 1886 its mentions in the press fade away), and in general had a high publishing coverage.

French newspapers had stated, following Austrian news sources, that religious workers in Vienna protested the exhibition in the form of sermons against atheistic art. One of these sermons is, supposedly, the pamphlet by Constantin Vidmar, a monk from the Scottish monastery in Vienna. The text combined two purposes: denouncing Vereshchagin and his artwork and consoling the Austrian audience. The text was composed as a sermon, reminding the Catholics of the basis of their faith, and emphasized the high level of morality, imagination, taste and faith of the Austrian Catholics, who would never be deceived by blasphemous ideas.

Furthermore, Vidmar proposes an idea, apparently, seen to him, as consoling: only Russian Christians or Polish Jews can believe what they would see in Vereshchagin's pictures, but not a true Austrian Catholic. Concerning the genre of the pamphlet, it is a printed version of a speech supposedly given against the "atheist artwork" (or written as such). The text itself is organized as a sermon, with the beginning of addressing to the "Honorable gathering", and occasionally follows the line of engaging with the audience. The sermon addresses the artistic value of the exhibition rather vaguely, instead focusing primarily on the biblical proof of the lack of Christ's genealogical immediate family. Concerning the artist himself, and his paintings, the epithets used are "wildest", "unthinkable", etc. An overview of the artist himself is very brief (perhaps implying that he was indeed well-known), but it is particularly accentuated, that he had shown the deeds of "Russian tyranny". When speaking about historical landscapes of Palestine, the formulation "historische Landschaften" is put in quotation marks, perhaps to show the irrelevance of Vereshchagin's depictions. But what is interesting here is the way the author tries to prove his point: to do so, he critiques the painters ability (or lack thereof) to create history paintings:

Someone who, a few years ago, did not allow himself to be influenced by the judgment of the daily papers, but listened to Vereshchagin's view of an artist, could not find a favorable opinion of his manner of painting. He had given a very realistic view of *Volkscenen*; a great skill in the technique, which, however, touched on the decorative painting and one spoke to him of the ability of the deepening into the objects. This implied that the artist had no qualifications for the difficult field of historical painting and this view was fully justified by the new exhibition. A sober realist is far from a history painter!<sup>77</sup>

One should view this pamphlet in dialogue with other documents produced on the matter. When the scandal occurred, grand media coverage surrounded the exhibition. Newspapers in Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, and Britain provided detailed descriptions of events and, according to available information and the biases of the papers, delivered an analysis of Vereshchagin himself, Russianness, art market, religious questions, positivism, nihilism, etc. This is why it is important to compare a provocative pamphlet, which was up to par (and probably cited) with

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<sup>77</sup> Vidmar. 10

outspoken media, with a seemingly neutral document, such as a catalogue of this same exhibition.

The comparison may be interesting from the following basis. Both documents are written by religious actors claiming to have knowledge of art history. Both are trying to use empirical methods of analysis, trying to assess the work of Vereshchagin, and have some common tropes that they use, as well as similar units of comparison. Both documents are essentially of a similar nature, but are structured differently.

The catalogue, to begin with, seems to be a play with how an art catalogue was structured (the name itself implies so). Its contents are based on an existing catalogue which had been produced for the exhibition. The original catalogue covered all the paintings, listing them numerically and providing brief descriptions for them. The original catalogue served as a basis for the author: he states for some instances, that he had first visited the exhibition personally to create a personal opinion, and then reading what the catalogue had to say on the subject. In other cases, he had done the other way around.

Thus, what is this second “catalogue” and how is it structured? It is a small book of thirteen pages, which, just like the pamphlet, and it is meant to be read from a first-person’s perspective in dialogue with the reader.

The author is Wilhelm Arthur Neumann, who was a Cistercian and a theologian. He studied and later professed biblical studies and oriental languages between 1861 and 1874, and in the following year held the positions of dean (1904/1905) and rector (1899/1900).<sup>78</sup> His field of research was Palestinian studies and archeology of art, as well as the restoration of ancient holy

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<sup>78</sup> Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815-1950 Online Edition, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. (Stand:04.10.2010). Date of access: [http://data.onb.ac.at/nlv\\_lex/perslex/NO/Neumann\\_Wilhelm\\_Anton.html](http://data.onb.ac.at/nlv_lex/perslex/NO/Neumann_Wilhelm_Anton.html)



sites. This occupation and field of interest provided the foundation for Neumann's arguments directed towards the exhibition.

From the start, the "catalogue" does not seem to be merely a religious response to "blasphemous" paintings. In fact, it barely gives attention to the images in question – it mentions only "The Holy Family" briefly, and the "Resurrection" is not mentioned at all. Neumann, as someone interested in archeology and biblical landscapes, pays close attention to the landscape paintings. The criterion for artistic value and, therefore, acceptance of the images is the archeological accuracy of details. Neumann uses his own experience in Palestine to compare, and goes as far as to claim that Vereshchagin is doing his artwork without having visited the Holy Land himself. The latter is not true, as the artist visited the area in 1883-1884, and had done sketches from nature.

For Neumann, the purpose of this "catalogue" does not seem to be a condemnation of the artist. To him, it is very much the research, professional aspect of the exhibition that brings him to writing the document. It is a contribution to a scientific debate on the Holy Land, largely promoted by Ernst Renan.<sup>79</sup> From this perspective Neumann approaches the analysis of images, and the tropes that he uses regarding Russian Orthodoxy lie in the realm of archaeology and ancient history. The following condemnation is part of his research discussion.

While the approaches may differ, the two documents – Vidmar's brochure and Neumann's "catalogue" – have a similar approach to tropes regarding their reasoning for Vereshchagin to do the exhibition in the first place. For example, according to Neumann<sup>80</sup>, "the basis for

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<sup>79</sup> Ernst Renan (1823-1892) was a critic and historian of religion. He was known for a positivist approach to history of Christianity, and his work *Life of Jesus*, published in 1863, followed this method. Due to its popularity, it was often used in conservative press as an epitome of anti-religious thought, sometimes entangled with ideas of nihilism or anticlericalism. Vereshchagin was personally acquainted to Renan, and the latter distributed pamphlets in his defense in France. See: *Tableau de Vereschagin*. La Croix, 26 Novembre 1885. P. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Neumann. 6

Vereshchagin is Russia's caesaropapism, that is fighting against believing Christians, and everywhere it touches, in image or word, there is a true cry".

Both authors recognize Vereshchagin as an "agent" of the Russian Empire, and claim that long traditions stand behind the work that he does. The "blasphemous" subject of the paintings was attributed to, in Vidmar's case, "Russian tyranny" and antagonism with the West, particularly, of Orthodoxy against Catholicism. Neumann also appeals to church history, but in an archaeological way – he talks about Russian iconography not aligning with that of the Byzantine. He roots the current (mis)understanding of religion and art by Russians in education:

We believe that we have found two sources from which the painted and printed outrage of Vereshchagin has sprung: one source is found in the present-day Russia's often skeptical, almost desperate, non-religious education, which is contained in the "*Manuel d'instruction laïque*"<sup>81</sup> would find a worthy textbook, and which has become accustomed to the painter, preferring to seek a better source for the presentation of Christian facts in unreliable, since spiteful, Jewish oral tradition, than in the uninterrupted, clear tradition of the Christian churches on these points.<sup>82</sup>

This notion is surprising, because the book Neumann mentions had been published only in 1884, and was supposed to have been a positivist "guide" to approaching religion. In Russia, education had become one of the most conservative throughout the empire's existence – the Great Reforms established an institution of classical gymnasia, where Orthodoxy was one of the foundations of the curriculum. Vereshchagin, however, living and working in Europe, was familiar with the mentioned "*Manuel*". Either way, in the given context it was hardly important whether the artist knew it or not – Neumann talks about a contemporary issue of European positivism teachings. Placing it on the shoulders of a Russian artist (who, of course, adhered to those teachings himself) made an overall European religious problem coming from a Russian actor. The question of the extent of Neuman's knowledge about the Russian cultural and educational situation is open, but even if this particular accusation can be taken as a way to convene a different message,

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<sup>81</sup> Monteil, Edgar. *Manuel D'instruction Laique*. Paris, 1884.

<sup>82</sup> Neumann. 4

he falls into discussing the issue of Russian nihilism. In his opinion, it has flourished because of caesaropapism in Russian political life (a surprising accusation which can be compared with views of Russian conservatives and administration of the time, who had quite different understanding of nihilistic roots), and the Byzantine church (he does not call it Orthodox) pressures the art in the same way, thus creating, how Neumann states, “religious nihilism”.<sup>83</sup> This is where the author brings the comparative perspective with the Catholic Church: in his opinion, because of the established iconography and Papal control through all the centuries, it is impossible to step away from the ideal, to be pressed by politics and be succumbed to materialism in painting. Vereshchagin, however, being subjected to Russian caesaropapism, is different. Neumann even describes the places chosen by the artist as subjects of his paintings as a “Russian manner”: for example, the mount Tabor, one of the holiest Orthodox sites, is described by Neumann as a choice if “he knows nothing about the Greeks”. (p.6)

Thus, the “Russian painter” became equal to the “Orthodox painter”, and his religious artwork was viewed as proselytism. Even in the absence of clear Orthodox traits, the images were proclaimed Orthodox mainly because the painter was Russian. The way both authors have built their argumentation can show the complexity of interpreting the correlation between text and image in the 1870-1880s, and how the predetermined knowledge of the audience played a key role in it. First of all, it was precisely documents like this that had made an episode that in another scenario could have been resolved as a conflict (and had been before - Vereshchagin's art has always been controversial) escalate to a scandal. The enthusiasm (both positive and negative) that attracted attention and expressions of affection or contempt towards the images, artist, and the event itself was forged largely by the texts that surrounded the exhibition (and the persona of the artist), not by the images themselves. An exhibition had become an event, and its contents – a means of expressing a message. The two documents, briefly analyzed here, show a spectrum of

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<sup>83</sup> Neumann. 5

problems that again point to the importance of recognizing individual actors and their manner of thinking and building an argument in sources related to exhibitions and art, as well as the power of textual media.

Here, there have been three actors on the first glance, but each of them had a larger background behind them. For example, Vereshchagin, whether he wanted it or not, was viewed as a Russian imperial actor. Whether he was one or not is largely debated nowadays in the Orientalist discourse, and there is never a distinct conclusion precisely because his role is being portrayed from an imposed discourse into which his individual choices may not always fit. This is why the case of Viennese scandal is peculiar – it highlights the fact, that contemporaries in Europe indeed saw Vereshchagin as an actor of the Russian Empire, with the burden of Orthodox history and Russian political life upon his shoulders. From this point of view one can ask the question what made one a Russian imperial actor in eyes of contemporaries and what were the conductors of these understandings.

Secondly, the difficulty of analysis of both sources comes from the difficulty of their authors to build a cohesive argument on the danger of exhibition, particularly for the Habsburg Empire. It is evident, that both Vidmar and Neumann make efforts to include Vereshchagin's Russianness as the root of danger. However, what they are talking about are entanglements in purely European networks. The actual knowledge of Russian cultural, educational, artistic and political situation appears to be either rather poor, or used as a metaphor. Another issue that both authors face is an attempt to work with art criticism to build an argument, but the methods they used either appeal to the abovementioned metaphors or empirical archaeological data (or, in Vidmar's case, generous Bible quotations), or to the purely aesthetical realm, sometimes joined with national connotations: for example, Vidmar emphasizes, that only a Pole or a Jew can be fooled by such blasphemous paintings, and a good Austrian Catholic cannot.

In Vienna, in the circles of contemporary art historians, the idea of Orthodox art being appealing, attractive and, consequently, dangerous to the loyalty of Slavic observers, was part of the discourse. The founder of Vienna's school of art, Rudolf Eitelberger,<sup>84</sup> connected the policies of the Russian Empire in the Orient at that time with the hostility of the Russian authorities to the Catholic Church. He argued, that Russia had a strong ideological appeal, and it should be resisted, as Vienna was a government that "declared a war to all non-Catholic faiths". Interestingly, that Eitelberger's criticism of the Catholic Church's intolerance to other confessions was considered by him to be a factor of the appeal of Russia for the Orthodox inhabitants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this sense, Russian proselytism threat, expressed in art, was targeted, by the thoughts of intellectual art historians, towards the Slavic population and was supported by the division between the Austrian Catholic and (Russian) Orthodox domains within the empire. This understanding might have affected the way educated professors and clergy viewed "art proselytism", and Vereshchagin's background and active media position played a role in placing an individual enterprise in line with imperial entanglements.

This, of course, does not mean that Vereshchagin himself did not use those discourses and scenarios to his advantage. For example, he did not deny his affiliation with the empire, even though most of his exhibitions of the time had been privately sponsored and created independently. He also kept exhibiting images and publishing texts on Russian conquest to Central Asia. In the sense of self-portrayal, he never formulated a distinct "program" on his view of the empire, its people or any of its expansionist projects. His accounts of wars, published in Russian, were rather positive. In fact, if one attempted to observe his textual accounts of the actions of Russian empire side by side with his paintings, one can find that the images do not

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<sup>84</sup> Matthew Rampley, *Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013. P. 171.

illustrate the texts. But this Viennese episode and the two sources that it produced once again raised the question of how imperial entanglements work on a micro level.

## **Conclusion. Realism in fin-de-siecle Russian Art: between Aesthetics and a Civic Program.**

Nineteenth century European art traditionally is viewed as a project on its pathway to realism. Indeed, throughout the century most countries, that were central to the development of European art institutions, have experienced a change in both the subject matter in images and in methods of depiction. Some of these changes were in the genre: by mid-century, historical scenes were pushed aside by pictures of "everyday life", portraits became more psychological, as did still-life. "Realism" was becoming the new paradigm of fine arts.

There is one starting point, however, in all debates on the nature of Russian realism. That point is materialized in Nicholas Chernyshevsky's "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality". Originally his master's thesis for a degree in Russian literature, it was written in 1853, and defended in 1855. This text (which was published in 1865 as a book)<sup>85</sup> spoke about the nature of realism in comparison between nature and art. Chernyshevsky tries to uncover the role of art in human life, while proposing a new concept of aesthetical thought, according to which reality would be the source of all things beautiful in art. The conclusion of this concept is that "true" beauty lies in the real life, and it is hierarchically higher than anything art can create.

While Chernyshevsky's thesis had been accepted to be programmatic in the new paradigm of Russian realism, it is questionable in the matter of the extent to which it was playing a role. The common assertion is the indication to the fact that from the 1860s, Russian liberal circles included the same people, essentially, artists coming from the middle class or from bankrupt gentry - like Vereshchagin himself - along with intelligentsia - professionally consisting of journalists, scientists, scholars, authors. With Chernyshevsky being involved in those circles as

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<sup>85</sup> Chernyshevsky, Nicholas. *Aesteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti*. [Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality]. Saint Petersburg, Typography of A.N. Pypin, 1865.

an ideologist of Russian revolutionary underground, it is highly likely that the text was discussed and the civil understanding of realism was derived from it.<sup>86</sup>

In the Russian case, another layer of the realism debate must be added due to the fact that it was not excluded from the framework of cultural mythology, which was being formulated both by the state and by intelligentsia. While consisting of various layers, cultural mythology of Russian intelligent circles at the time was promoting an inclination towards Russian historical revival, promoting Russian own folklore past and actively studying it. Realism as a concept was held against the highly mythologized images of the Russian past. Thus, realism in Russia became not only an artistic method, but a part of the political program for all participants, and this form of realism was expected from Russia on the international arena, as well.

In 1889, Vasily Vereshchagin published an article on realism in the United States along with one of his exhibitions in New York, and republished later in Russian in the journal “Khudozhnik” (“Artist”).<sup>87</sup> The article is devoted to realism, and speaks of criticism that Vereshchagin had faced for his “realistic” artwork in the 1870s-1880s.

According to Vereshchagin, depicting real life is not enough to be a realist. For him, as for most artists of the time, realism can be approached from two directions: from the point of view of the subject matter (i.e., making the subject of the image something that had happened in real life, for example, some historical event, or everyday life of certain people), or from the notion of artistic precision (making the depiction of given events, portraits and surroundings as accurate as possible). For Vereshchagin, the most important instrument to achieve the synthesis of both approaches is the personal impression of the realist artist. He notes, that creating characters from

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<sup>86</sup> Valkenier, Elizabeth. Politics in the Russian Art: The Case of Repin. *Russian Review*, 37, 1978, 14-29.

<sup>87</sup> Vereshchagin, Vasily. *Realism*. New York, American Art Galleries, 1889. I am using the digitalized version of the text from the database of a project on Russian art criticism: <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/rva/texts.html>. Last accessed: April 16, 2020.



photographs in studios renders no emotionally compelling result, making the "aim of the painting unrealized". For example, for Vereshchagin a French artist painting the events of Anglo-Zulu war from photographs creates neither British nor Zulus, but "French soldiers dressed in British uniforms, and ordinary Parisian black models depicted in various more or less martial poses".

In essence, Vereshchagin points to the dichotomy between images and their perception, which, in the absence of realism, becomes distorted. This idea is positioned in the greater debate of the late nineteenth century about the role and functionality of art. If one looks back on Chernyshevsky and his ideas about relations between art and reality, one can see this same question, but addressed from the point of view of aesthetics. For both authors, realism in art always stays on the margins of idealism. For Chernyshevsky idealism is a category of beauty, for Vereshchagin - a category of truth, of narrative.

Vereshchagin considers himself a representative of realism because, according to him, he incorporates the idea and artistic precision within his images. Thus, he, essentially, brings together the idea and the method.

For Vereshchagin, realism is dynamic. It is an attempt to portray the time when the image was created. In that sense, for him Raphael was also a realist, for his paintings showcased the era when Raphael lived. However, with time, as scientific discoveries progress, realism of one era becomes idealism for the other. This makes new realism always scandalous, as it comes into conflict with idealized images of earlier eras. Thus, realism becomes not only a method, but rather a program, which is executed through the method, and it is revolutionary at its core.

It is important to note that the role of images was connected to reality in a practical way. For Vereshchagin's art, a characteristic case had happened in 1882 in Berlin, when, during an exhibition of his paintings, depicting scenes from Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke forbade military personnel to attend it. He was convinced that paintings depicting the horrors of war in a realistic photographic fashion would hinder the spirit and conduct of the military.<sup>88</sup> This practicality of art is a vital component of the whole understanding of realism in the nineteenth century. The role of artist within this model, according to both Chernyshevsky and Vereshchagin, was to identify the "truth" and to transmit it through canvas. For Chernyshevsky, this mission lies more within the realms of aesthetics and understanding what beauty truly is, whereas for Vereshchagin it places the responsibility of civic duty upon the artist.

This episode with the Berlin also shows very well that the idea of practicality of art, and of realism as a method, lay beyond merely intellectual realms of a scholar (that of Chernyshevsky), or of artists themselves. The audience also had an agency in conducting the conceptualization of art and its messages. This is why some scholars include Russian realist art of the era into the same category as other types of media - such as newspapers, books, public lectures<sup>89</sup>, and even include it as a source into the historiographical debate of whether there existed a developing public sphere in Russia of the Great Reforms.

A second aspect that formed the category of analysis for realism was the issue of entertainment. Entertainment can itself be approached differently, but it is always in dialogue with the audience, in the case of art - with the spectators, whose demands may refer to different things: aesthetical

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<sup>88</sup> The episode had been quoted in many sources, but, notably, it was also described in detail in the first completed biography of Vereshchagin, published in St Petersburg in 1896. The biography was funded by the state through the Academy of Arts: Bulgakov F.I. *Vasily Vasilievich Vereshchagin i ego proizvedeniia*. [Vasiy Vasilievich Vereshchagin and His Art]. Saint Petersburg, 1896.

<sup>89</sup> This problem is analyzed in depth here: Dianina, Katia. *When Art Makes News: Writing Culture and Identity in Imperial Russia*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. Particularly see chapters 3 and 4.

pleasure, self-analysis, populism, or desire for some measure of truth. For Chernyshevsky, the ultimate pleasure derives from the aesthetic connection of art to reality. For Vereshchagin, as it was for many Russian artists of the time, reality and truth were taken a step further and, in the contrary, disconnected from pleasure. The role of art, in other words, was not to provide entertainment, but to serve as a platform to exercise civic duty and serving one's country.

Thus, the main conclusion of this thesis may be re-stated here as following: while Vereshchagin's art was connected to personal life of the artist, it was largely in conversation with various factors, such as institutions in the Russian Empire, prevailing cultural mythology and a certain view of history, the scientific advances of positivism and, certainly, professional desires of the artist. This means that no overarching paradigm can be applied when approaching his art in its vast complex, as the conditions under which art was created and later perceived, differed. It's perception was, for the most part, preconditioned, in this case, by an existing idea of what "Russianness" is and what role the Russian Empire and its people played in European society and politics in the late nineteenth century. This is why Vereshchagin's art was perceived as "national", even though, according to himself, he viewed his art in the framework of a mission of realism, in a certain sense, disconnected from the ethnic and national questions. The exhibitions in London and in Vienna show this problem from two different angles. In the first, the artist himself was an active participant of this nationalizing preconception of art, and did not deny it in discussion of cultural diplomacy. In the second case, however, while Vereshchagin himself focused his work on the realistic program, the pre-existing idea of a certain Russian "message" was prevailing over art itself. In other words, "Russianness" was expected to be seen even in its absence.

Perhaps, this civic understanding of Russian realism, highlighted in Vereshchagin's texts (and not only his - various artists of the era published similar ideas)<sup>90</sup> was what made it stand apart from the European art (if one unifies various artistic movements of Europe of the time in one archetype, as literature so often suggests). Its connection with the revolutionary underground and ties with the various social transformations of the Great Reforms place it, almost automatically, into a framework that is connected with many factors. It is impossible to separate Russian art of the time, even if it is liberal or "oppositionist" in any way, from state institutions, and it is, certainly, impossible to separate it from the intellectual framework of the empire. Perhaps this framework, with Vereshchagin being only one of its components, can indicate an institutional approach to the conversation on the role of an artist and his art in the late Russian Empire.

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<sup>90</sup> In the same period (1860s-1890s) various artists in Russia published their thought on ways of development of Russian art, art in general and the mission of the artist. For example, such artists as Nicholas Ge or Ivan Kramskoi. In the Soviet interpretation their publications were conceptualized through the prism of them being "ideologists" of the rising socialist approach to art, essentially, as predecessors of socialist realism. However, upon closer examination of both their publications and private letters, it makes more sense to view their approaches in line with the positivist teachings and realistic approach to art, which was followed by the idea of a national civic mission that an artist should hold in transmitting "the truth", rather than with criticism of vices of society and political regime. Examples of Soviet approach can be found, for example, through a work like this: Kovalenskaya, T.N. *Kramskoi ob iskusstve*. [Kramskoi on art]. Academy of Art of USSR, 1960.

## Appendix

### *Vasily Vasilievich Vereshchagin (1842-1904)*

October 14 (26) 1842 - born in Cherepovets, Russia.

1860-1863 - studies in the Imperial Academy of Arts. Quits his studies in 1863.

1864-1865 - studies in Paris in the workshop of Jean-Léon Gérôme.

1867 - voyage to Central Asia. Vereshchagin takes part in the military campaigns there in 1867-1868.

1869 - first exhibition in Saint Petersburg. He shows the "Turkestan series".

1873 - London Crystal Palace exhibition. His first personal exhibition. There he shows the "Turkestan series" again. See chapter 2 of this thesis.

1877 - Vereshchagin takes part in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 before getting injured in

1877 - after the war he creates a series of paintings depicting it.

1884 - voyage to Syria and Palestine, where he starts his "Evangelic series".

1885 - as part of his European tour, opens an exhibition in Vienna, where his "Evangelical series" cause a scandal from the Viennese Catholic authorities. See chapter 3 of this thesis.

1904 - Russo-Japanese war, where he dies on the 31st of March (13th of April) during the bombarding of the mine boat "Petropavlovsk".

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