

Russian Visual Art Criticism, 1800-1913
Primary text in Translation

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To the Advocate of the Academy of Arts¹

An article was recently published in *The Contemporary Chronicle* (*Sovremennaia letopis'*) about the latest art exhibition in Petersburg, which spoke of the new direction of the present generation of artists and of the old habits of the Academy.²

The Academy has found itself a defender. He wrote the article as evidence that what the Academy does is excellent and should not be any other way; and that those who oppose the Academy have lost their way, and so on.

But this article was not printed in the full form in which it was submitted in manuscript form: *The St Petersburg Gazette* (*Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*) found room in no. 258 only for one excerpt, declaring that 'space does not permit us to print the entire article' of the Mr Advocate of the Academy of Arts (as they called him), but that, incidentally, there 'would be no loss for the reader because of this'.³ Moreover, *The St Petersburg Gazette* appended its own objections to this article. We are fully in accord with those objections, but it seems to us that not everything was said there which should have been. We shall therefore attempt to say what remains unsaid, sincerely hoping, in so doing, that we shall not be obliged to respond to all the ideas of Mr Advocate of the Academy. Notwithstanding the assurances of *The St Petersburg Gazette* that the essentials were published, we nevertheless suspect that many more curious details remain in the manuscript.

¹ Written in 1864, but first published in 1894 as 'G-nu advokatu Akademii khudozhestv'. This translation from V.V. Stasov, *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh*. Vol. 1 ('Moscow: 'Iskusstvo', 1952), pp. 48-52. The person referred to by Stasov throughout this article as the 'Advocate of the Academy' is the Academy Rector, the painter and teacher Fedor Antonovich Bruni (1800-75). For further details, see the Introduction to this translation.

² Author's note: 'Po povodu vystavki v Akademii khudozhestv' [Apropos of the Exhibition in the Academy of Arts], *Sovremennaia letopis'*, no. 39 (1861).

³ Author's note: *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 1861, no. 258.

Such articles as the present objections made by Mr Advocate of the Academy must be responded to without fail. Here, what is important is what the Academy of Arts does at the present time: how the arts are proceeding amongst us, what direction are they taking, whether the former organization of the Academy should be preserved, or whether it should be changed. All this is so important that it would be desirable to hear everything that Mr Advocate has to say (we find the appellation 'advocate' very appropriate, and have taken it from *The St Petersburg Gazette*). We also wish that there were many such advocates, and not just one. Nevertheless, we shall examine what has been said up till now.

The Advocate of the Academy has but three main objections in all to the article in *The Contemporary Chronicle* (*Sovremennaia letopis'*). First, why is it that it is non-specialists who write about the arts in this country; second, that the Academy cannot do without tasks set from Antiquity and cannot offer its students themes for their competition pictures; third, that at present there is still no opportunity to paint (or at least, no academic programmes for so doing) on subjects from Russian history.

It is impossible to agree with any of these objections. Equally, we cannot concede anything here to the Advocate, and it would seem that he is hardly likely to find many people of the same opinion as him outside the walls of the Academy.

The Advocate of the Academy is *indignant* (as *The St Petersburg Gazette* attests) about the fact that art reviews are written by non-specialists. It is a great shame that he is indignant about this. This merely goes to show that he has absolutely no wish to know what is going on in society. Where is it, after all, that Mr Advocate has seen art reviews written by specialists: i.e. artists themselves, landscape painters, architects, sculptors? This happens nowhere, and now is even less likely to do so. If the reading public were to wait for reviews by specialists then it would have to do without reviews at all. Our Academy of Arts (and it follows, our specialists) has been in existence for a *hundred years* already, and reviews by specialists are yet to appear. And the public does not have time to wait for specialists to get the urge to, or learn how to, write reviews. It has had the need for reviews for a long time now, and for a long time has received them (as it has

everything which it needs). And suddenly the 'advocate' declares them unlawful! Who has ever stood in the way of there being 'lawful' reviews as well? May they henceforth appear, and may they henceforth be compared with those which the 'advocate' would wish to chase away, and then the decision may be taken about which is to remain.

And what is the reason for such disdain towards poor non-specialists? I think it is because these non-specialists are very uncomfortable about speaking in favour of specialists. This is how it has been throughout time, and not just in the arts. Specialists always wish to chase off all their critics, whom they label 'non-specialists'; i.e., in other words, by a verbal sleight of hand that in the language of jurisprudence is called a 'deflection'. Who has not been 'deflected' in times past from criticism, from an examination of everything which takes place in one or another sphere of life, knowledge, art? Who has not been accused of 'lack of vocation'? And, despite this, however, these indignant and sometimes furious critics have not been attended to. It has happened that those 'non-specialists without calling' have very frequently turned out to be just those people who have given a new, strong current, as though finally making the silt of a stagnant pool turn into a clear, flowing stream. In the end, specialists and non-specialists have agreed on the thought (the only true one in the present case) that the matter lies not in specialism or non-specialism, but in the ability to undertake the business of criticism, to discriminate, to examine, to understand. One may be a specialist a thousand times over and nevertheless not have the gift of criticism. One may, on the contrary, be gifted in criticism and in no way be a specialist in the matter selected and critiqued. It is enough to be *a specialist in critique*: that is all that is needed. Artistic criticism is a speciality like any other. One cannot ask of it that it be directly linked with artistic creativity; such a demand only demonstrates a primacy, almost an infancy of understanding. Can it really be the case that art alone should remain in this state when this is already long ago expelled from other fields of human thought and activity? Imagine what would happen were everyone to be forced to restrict themselves to specialists in a given business, if no one dared to object, if any dissent, any free thought of the non-specialist mind must be crushed?

We would then even now be forced to consider great those whom Russian art specialists considered to be great or unusual in the hundred years of their existence on the basis of their own ‘armchair’ trials and punishments. We would have to believe that the most profound Russian talents were those who were listed as Professors, and that the lesser talents were those who were merely Academicians, while those who had not received any sort of artistic rank had no talent at all. On this basis we would have to count the greatest talents of our century, Fedotov⁴ and Ivanov⁵, and Chemesov⁶ in the previous century, as a hundred times lower than those that the Academy considered to be its bright lights. But the non-specialists would remain separated in their opinions by an unbridgeable abyss from the specialists—and thank God! Thus we see that both our present ‘advocate’, and all those to come, would be better to give up being indignant at the fact that non-specialists are doing a job that is not theirs. Let specialists do their thing from now on, and let their ‘advocates’ forgive us for our lack of specialism and prove directly that we are not right. Then we will be silent.

Unhappy is that country where art believes only in the judgment of its specialists and is suspicious of any other sort of judgment. In such a place art will not raise itself above the difficulties of production, and will forget all that comprises the soul of art: the truth and accuracy of content. Specialists will never cast judgment on that: only non-specialists, only the public, will never forget this, the main thing in every work of art. They alone will direct all their attention, and all their demands to this main thing; they will turn art’s attention to that which it should be: a beautiful vessel that exists not just in itself, but for the sake of profound or beautiful content.

In the two other objections by the Advocate of the Academy a still worse case is made, it seems to me, on behalf of the Academy. He claims that a campaign has been declared against the art of antiquity and its study. But where has such a

⁴ Fedotov, Pavel Andreevich (1815-52). Russian genre painter.

⁵ Ivanov, Aleksandr Andreevich (1806-58). Russian historical painter. The son of a professor at the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg, he studied there before travelling on an Academy grant or ‘pension’ to Italy. His most famous work is *The Appearance of Christ to the People*, on which he worked for twenty years, completing it in 1857.

thing ever been said? The matter concerned not the study of antiquities, but the composition of pictures on subjects from antiquity. Surely there is a difference between these? Can it really be the case that anyone who paints Venus or Bacchus is in this way capable of penetrating antiquity, the life of antiquity, the people, the events of antiquity? What an amusing thought! Only a ‘specialist’ or his defender would be capable of thinking this. In our, non-specialist, opinion, even if you were to draw Venus, Apollo or Bacchus repeatedly for a thousand years you nevertheless would not be a hair’s breadth closer to an understanding of antiquity, nor to the possibility of recreating the life of antiquity, if you do not bear the spirit and concept of antiquity within yourself, if you do not develop this primary gift by an education which is directed towards an even greater insight of antiquity. But in the view of the advocate it is enough to sketch some naked bodies or other, to spend some time copying some pleats in cloth or other in order then to create antique paintings or *bas-reliefs*!

Our art has already tolerated a great deal in the course of a hundred years because of such thinking. Anyone can see now that the matter will never be sorted out, that there is no point in expecting good to come out of bad. What sort of direct conclusion may be drawn? To let the system lie where there is nothing to expect from it, and to busy oneself all the more quickly with those things from which something may be expected? Arguing in an utterly old-fashioned way, just like some sort of Academy Conference-Secretary of fifty or a hundred years ago, our current ‘Advocate of the Academy’ cries out in his indignation: ‘What would journalists say about a study of literature which did not demand knowledge of grammar and of the history of literature? Where the works of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare were disdainfully rejected, and where people studied the art of self-expression on bits of paper as in Shchedrin’s *Provincial Notes*?’⁷ What would they say? They would say that this is a very odd way of understanding the study of literature—as comprised of a knowledge of grammar and of literary history; they

⁶ Chemesov, Evgraf Petroich (1737-65). Russian artist, especially noted as an engraver.

⁷ ‘N. Shchedrin’ was the pseudonym of the satirical writer Mikhail Evgrafovich Saltykov (1826-89), who is usually known as ‘Saltykov-Shchedrin’. *Provincial Notes (Gubernskie ocherki)* is a series of satirical sketches published in serial form in 1856-57 and in book form in 1857.

would say that the pictures that the Academy has demanded and continues to demand of its pupils are utterly unlike the works of Homer and Shakespeare, and that they are more like the elevated tragedies and odes in five acts, or in twenty-four songs, which sent everyone into raptures in the last century and now drive everyone into indescribable boredom. Then they would also say that it is time for the Academy and its advocates to understand that whoever needs to write provincial sketches will undoubtedly study Shchedrin's sketches as they should any work that fulfils its task with talent and excellence, and that now academies do not prevent anyone from developing and learning from whatever is appropriate and necessary for his talent, be it Homer or Shchedrin. 'The Advocate' objects (and says in print) that 'only on the basis of subjects from antiquity can the pupil demonstrate the extent of his imagination's development, and how he can create a whole from a composition of memorized forms of the naked body.' Well, so be it! This is one of those phrases to which it is impossible to respond and to which one can only shrug one's shoulders. The advocate can read Racine's tragedies with deep emotion and delight, but we find imagination and creativity in much else besides, and we ask this of both artist and pupil for a completely different purpose.

Memorized forms remain memorized throughout the life of the artist, as our art's century-old history demonstrates. Lord help us to put some distance between us and these forms and to forget them. This will be enabled by reality alone, by truth drawn from nature alone, by art alone which is produced from our youth onwards, not 'Charon' and 'The Olympic Games'⁸, but scenes of real life which are despised by 'advocate-specialists', but which advance our national art. Show me at what point, and to where, have all your antique competitions and programmes advanced our art. For us, as for others, nothing has come of this other than an empty and senseless waste of time. Understand, at least a tiny bit, that art has advanced everywhere in Europe because artists' hands have been untied, and since the demands for that which appears to you to be the only plank of salvation have ceased to be made of them.

⁸ Compulsory subjects for paintings set by the Academy.

‘The Advocate of the Academy’ will continue to object, as his ancient predecessors did, that there is no way of deciding what is worthy of which award if students are not set one and the same theme. Why is this? In this way he pays an extremely poor compliment to the Academy, as if saying that the academic specialists are capable of judging only between subjects of utterly identical content, and, were that content to be varied, then they would immediately lose their heads. If that were the case, then would be really only be able to decide which of two peaches was the better, and if the question was, ‘which is better — a good peach or a bad turnip?’ then we would be stumped? Why must everything be reduced to a common denominator like this? Why their equalization? Why this endless succession of identical items? Specialists *are* specialists precisely because they are supposed to be able to look, to see, and to understand. But for pupils there is a great difference: for one may not be capable specifically of the subject that is set him, and, perhaps, were he to paint of his own accord, he could select a subject in which he would demonstrate all his artistic abilities.

In the article in *The Contemporary Chronicle* the extreme unsuitability of the subject from Russian history which students were set for the last competition was remarked upon.⁹ What did our advocate say to that? He replied in the strangest of ways. He claims that we cannot set any more Russian subjects: that both Russian history is insufficiently developed, and that the museum of the Academy is not ready for this. Poor us! Not to see any Russian pictures! God knows when the Museum will be ready, and there will be even longer to wait for Russian history. Not developed, not ready! As if it is absolutely essential for our paintings to know exactly whether Rurik¹⁰ was a Lithuanian or Norman, and if we don’t know that,

⁹ In a footnote Stasov identifies the topic as ‘At the wedding of Vasilii the Dark Sof’ia Vitovtovna pulls the belt from Prince Vasilii Kosoi’. The exercise set by the Academy for 1861 was to depict an incident that took place in 1433 at the wedding of Grand Prince Vasilii Vasilievich (Vasilii II, who was later blinded and nicknamed ‘Temnyi’, ‘the Dark’ or ‘the Blind’). His cousin, Vasilii Kosoi (‘Squint-eyed’), appeared at the wedding wearing a belt that had once belonged to the bridegroom’s grandfather, the great military leader Dmitrii Donskoi. On seeing this, the bridegroom’s mother, Sof’ia Vitovtovna, took the belt from Vasilii Kosoi in the presence of all the wedding guests. Five representations of this scene were exhibited at the Academy in 1861.

¹⁰ According to the *Primary Chronicle*, Rurik (or ‘Riurik’) was the eldest of three Varangian (‘Viking’ or ‘Norsemen’) brothers who, in 862 A.D. came to what is now Russia. Rurik settled in Novgorod and his descendants were the princes of Kievan Rus’. It has long been a matter of scholarly debate whether the

then we can cast aside all the rest of Russian history. As if all tasks get stuck on inexplicable points! As if once you explain these points then everything else will become clear! And also as if everything depends on the museum! Ah, no, no! The history of other peoples has been *developed* for a long time, and all sorts of museums and publications have existed for a long time, but our art is somehow still not appropriate. There are pages of advanced books, the halls of museums have long been open, and yet our artists have still not gleaned anything from them. And, as if on purpose, it is antique art that has been *developed* most of all and collected in the *museum*, and nevertheless nothing has come of this.

So there is no reason to fear lack of development, and no point in setting one's hopes so in museums. Something else is needed. We need to stop viewing *genre* (or, in the excellent phrase of one 'non-specialist', the painting of everyday life) with suspicion, we must give artists free will, we must no longer demand of them what does not accord with their sympathies, or wishes, or capabilities, and we must give them an absolute freedom of choice of subjects for their Gold Medal examinations, in which they may depict life, truth, and poetry.

I deeply regret that the 'advocate of the Academy' did not say a single word about what was written in *The Contemporary Chronicle* about our architecture and sculpture, but perhaps this is yet to come.

ruling dynasty of Kiev was of Norse ('Norman') or other origin, and it is to this debate that Stasov here refers.