

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

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False Art and False Artists¹

There is nothing surprising in this: this is a commonplace matter. It is always like this. As soon as there emerges any new, great, important matter, as soon as it arises and moves forwards, then cunning, practical-minded folk immediately crawl out from all corners and in an instant set up their own little shack alongside, their own wretched little stall, and start to ply their profitable trade.

‘We too, we too!’, they exclaim, setting out their worthless, stale wares in murky, unwashed windows. Now the same thing has happened with us. The great matter of the people’s emancipation arose and moved forward: Samson exerted all his strength, the knots and ropes which bound him gave way from his mighty burst of effort, he seized the gates of the city in which he had for so long suffered, and bore them on his shoulders, and then, suddenly, up trotted some people from somewhere or other, calling themselves ‘artists’, who exclaimed, ‘We too! We too are with Samson, and support Samson. We will help him, we will teach him what he must do, what he must undertake – for we know, we already know everything that has to be done, and we want to take part in and arrange Samson’s new life, we want to contribute our share.’

But what sort of participation is this? What sort of ‘share’ is this? What sort of people are these? What do they want?

They are merely a handful of decadents, a small part of that strange, surprising sect which preaches ugliness and deformity in art, ugliness of thought and form, and who assiduously demonstrate this in their paintings and statues.

But this sect is incidental and ephemeral, after all, and for us in Russia it merely apes, poorly, what went on in European art a few years ago. What do their insanities,

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their public declarations matter to Russian artists - especially to those who really are 'artists' and 'Russian', and, most importantly, who are in fact healthy rather than ill?

These decadent gentlemen now declare to all and sundry the news that the real goal and task of art is beauty, and that this beauty is faced or (they fear) perhaps threatened by the danger of the utilitarian impetus of the Revolution², and that therefore timely measures must be taken and art must be saved.

What fun, what nonsense! The Decadents will save someone! And 'beauty' in particular, which they have no idea about with all their ubiquitous ugliness and idiocies! And these are [art's] protectors, these are its helpmates!

But the main thing was that they had to hoist such a stale, old-fashioned standard as 'beauty', when modernity does not admit such an exclusive task for the arts, which have long been recognized and firmly established in all their truthfulness, scope, and depth.

Surely it cannot be that the paintings and sculptures of such genuine, elevated, and powerful artists as Rembrandt and Velasquez, Hogarth, Goya, Houdon, Courbet and Menzel³, of the Dutch artists of old of the seventeenth century, and the new English artists of the start of the nineteenth century, and then of our Russian artists Fedotov and Perov, Antokol'skii, Repin, Vereshchagin and Surikov⁴—surely all their works were not brought into the world for the sake of beauty and love alone, with nothing deeper and more important in them? What an unhappy notion, what paucity of artistic intellect! Art in the role of entertainer, humorist, joker, as an 'embellishment of life' for people who are idle, insignificant, unfocused, who are incapable of either thought or feeling, and who are simply bored! But there are already so many means of 'embellishing life' on this earth, so many amusements and all sorts of foolish nonsense.

Non-decadent artists have always thought completely otherwise. Beethoven said: '...as if from a stone, art must strike fire from the human breast...'⁵. Belinskii said: '... the art of our time is an expression which is realised in the refined forms of modern

² The revolution of 1905.

³ The artists mentioned here are: Rembrandt (full name Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, 1606-69), Dutch painter, especially noted for his use of light and shade and famous as a great portraitist; Velasquez (or Velazquez), Diego Rodriguez de Silva y (1599-1660), Spanish painter noted for the realism of his work; Hogarth, William (1697-1764), English satirical genre painter; Goya, Francisco de (1746-1828), Spanish painter and etcher; Houdon, Jean Antoine (1741-1828), French neoclassical sculptor; Courbet, Gustave (1819-77), French realist painter; Menzel, Adolf von (1815-1905), German realist painter.

⁴ The Russian artists mentioned here are: Fedotov, Pavel Andreevich (1815-52); Perov, Vasilii Grigor'evich (1833/34-82); Antokol'skii, Mark Matveevich (1843-1902); Repin, Il'ia Efimovich (1844-1930); Vereshchagin, Vasilii Vasilievich (1842-1904); Surikov, Vasilii Ivanovich (1848-1916)

⁵ Beethoven, Ludwig van (1770-1827): 'Music should strike fire from the heart of man, and bring tears from the eyes of woman'.

consciousness. I do not need poetry or artistry more than I do a true narrative, for example. The main thing is that it raises questions and makes an ethical impression on society. If it attains that goal, and without any sort of poetry and artistry, then it is no less interesting to me for that. If the work arouses questions and makes an ethical impression on society, at the heights of artistry, then, it goes without saying, I prefer it, but the main thing, for me, nevertheless lies in the thing itself and not in showy elegance.’⁶

Lev Tolstoi said:⁷ ‘Art is one of the means of communication between people ... For as long as there have been people, true art has had no other meaning than as a scientific expression of humankind’s purpose and boon. The thinker and artist should suffer with the people in order to find salvation or consolation ... He who will be a thinker and artist is not he who is educated in an institution where they, as it were, *make* the scholar and artist (this is precisely what those who blight science and art do), and who receives a diploma and material security. Rather, it is he who would gladly not think and express what lies within his soul, but who is unable not to do what he is led to do by the two irresistible forces of his inner necessity and the needs of the people.’

Chernyshevskii⁸ said: ‘Art is on this earth in order to reproduce what exists in life. It explains life, but also passes judgement on living phenomena.’

These are the real legislators of art: these are our true mentors, instructors, and guides in the business of art. They would see the sole designation of art as the expression and rendering of ‘beauty’ as caricatured and disgracefully clumsy. Our artistic cripples and stutterers have now decided to demonstrate their true, genuine and deep feeling towards the great efforts in regeneration and in the increase in the people’s cause that is now taking place amongst us, namely by declaring that what we now need and what is now most pressing is ‘to clarify to everyone the path that art must take so that beauty and art will come together in life’, and that the free life which is now unfolding before us will bring forth new, as yet unknown talents and strengths who will no longer be isolated, as contemporary artists are, but whose art will become a great, truly populist art of the future.... [...]

They step forward as prophets of the future (which, of course, they know), they promise the advent of a new art and new talents amongst us. And just so – for such a matter is fully probable, possible, and even more, is to be desired. God grant that there should always be more and more talents in our society. Our land is great and plentiful,

⁶ Belinskii, Vissarion Grigor’evich (1811-48). Russian critic and social thinker. These words come from an article of 1843.

⁷ Tolstoi, Lev Nikolaevich (1828-1910). Russian novelist and thinker.

⁸ Chernyshevskii, Nikolai Gavrilovich (1829-89). Russian critic and social reformer.

and has always brought forth many remarkable, beneficent, and marvellous creative people, and it is entirely likely that this will always be the case in future: the art of all peoples always moves forward, again and again, growing and gaining in strength. But it is shameful and bad to be ignorant of and blind to what has long existed and shone forth in all its glory, and to imagine that ‘our art will *become* a great, truly populist art of the future...’ only at some subsequent point.

Shall we really allow such stupidity to be preached? Is our art really still so infantile, so insignificant, that it is not even worth paying attention to this? Is it really the case that there has been nothing in art until now but vain trinkets and playthings for the idle, aristocratic upper classes, and there is still nothing in it that the true, authentic people need. If so, then we must at the same time say that neither do we yet have any significant, original people’s literature or poetry. We still have to wait for that. We must declare that we have no *Resurrection*, no *Sevastapol Stories*, no *Cossacks*, no *Polikushka*, no *Strider* [*Kholstomer*], no *War and Peace*, no ‘*Anna Karenina*,⁹ no *Woe from Wit*¹⁰, no *Poltava*, no *Stone Guest*, no *Evgenii Onegin*, no *Captain’s Daughter*¹¹; neither do we have the entire library of Ostrovskii¹², or *Tales of the Merchant Kalashnikov*¹³, or *Dead Souls*,¹⁴ *House of the Dead*,¹⁵ *Song of the Stormy Petrel*, *Song of the Falcon*, or *Song of the Birds*,¹⁶ or all of Chekhov¹⁷, Pomialovskii¹⁸ and Reshetnikov¹⁹.

Russian art is the blood brother of Russian literature. They both share one soul, one spirit, heart and thought, the same strivings, the same loves, hates, wishes, hopes, and tasks, and their creators and artists have one and the same nature.

In our land there have not yet emerged artists who are the equal of Lev Tolstoi, Herzen²⁰, Pushkin or Gogol’, but there is already an entire array of artistic creations which come close to them in thought, feeling, popular feeling and talent.

⁹ All the works mentioned thus far are novels and stories by Lev Tolstoi.

¹⁰ The play *Woe from Wit* (*Gore ot uma*, completed 1825) by Aleksandr Sergeevich Griboedov (1795-1829).

¹¹ Works in diverse genres by Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin (1799-1837).

¹² Ostrovskii, Aleksandr Nikolaevich (1823-86), Russian dramatist.

¹³ A reference to a long poem of 1837 by Mikhail Iur’evich Lermontov (1814-41)

¹⁴ By Nikolai Vasil’evich Gogol’ (1809-52).

¹⁵ By Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii (1821-81).

¹⁶ The first two of these titles are early works by Maksim Gor’kii (Aleksandr Maksimovich Peshkov, 1868-1936). The sentence structure suggests that the *Song of the Birds* is also by Gor’kii, but no such work is listed in his *Collected Works*.

¹⁷ Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich (1860-1904), Russian prose-writer and dramatist.

¹⁸ Pomialovskii, Nikolai Gerasimovich (1835-63). Russian prose-writer.

¹⁹ Reshetnikov, Fedor Mikhailovich (1841 –71). Russian writer.

²⁰ Aleksandr Herzen (Gertsen) (1812-70), the illegitimate son of a nobleman, Ivan Iakovlev, was a leading Russian writer and social reformer.

We can only marvel at how, in the short time of its existence, from the middle of the nineteenth century, that is, starting from a significantly later era than the one when Russian literature began, Russian art has succeeded in doing so much, in moving forward so quickly and with such scope.

Whatever new great works are prepared for us in the future it is likely that the general popular significance will not fade or diminish of such works as Repin's *Volga Barge Haulers*,²¹ *The Confession*,²² *The Propagandist's Arrest*,²³ *They Did Not Expect Him*,²⁴ *Reception of the Elders*,²⁵ *The State Council*,²⁶ Antokol'skii's *Attack by the Inquisition*²⁷ and *Ivan the Terrible*²⁸; Surikov's *Lady Morozova*²⁹ and *The Streltsy*;³⁰ the majority of Vereshchagin's war paintings; a whole host of paintings by Fedotov, Perov, Vladimir Makovskii³¹ and others, who reproduce the life in Russia of all classes, particularly the oppressed, in all their truth, poverty, misfortune, need, occasional stupefaction, corruption and degradation. Happiness and joy are a rare moment in these. All this is profoundly original. The new art will undoubtedly proceed further along this same road, and not along any other.

It has been marvellously begun (as was literature), and is far from exhausted. That which already exists is magnificent, and significant. To wait for a *beginning* when it has already existed for a long time is mad, comic, and absurd.

The era of unions has come upon us now. This is one of the most powerful, useful and efficacious of means of progress for those forms of life which are essential to the presently heterogeneous social classes. Rumours have now spread that our artists also intend to try to unite in this way to establish their rights and demands. [...] Yes, it is high time for artists to attend to their fate, their rights and shortcomings from the point of view of life and external forces. There once was a time when our artists viewed this seriously. That was in 1863, when 13 young artists protested against the Academy and its ways, and

²¹ *Burlaki na Volge* (1870–1873).

²² *Refusal of Confession before the Execution (Otkaz ot ispovedi pered kazn'iu)* (1879–1885).

²³ *Arest propagandista* (1880–1892).

²⁴ *Ne zhdali* (1884–1888).

²⁵ *Alexander III receives the Elders in the Courtyard of the Petrov Palace in Moscow (Priem volostnykh starshin Aleskandrom III vo dvore Petrovskogo dvortsa v Moskve)* (1886).

²⁶ *Ceremonial meeting of the State Council of 7 May 1901 on the day of the Centenary of its Establishment (Torzhestvennoe zasedanie Gosudarstvennogo soveta 7 maia 1901 goda v den' stoletnego iubileiia so dnia ego uchrezhdeniia)* (1903). All of the paintings mentioned in notes 21–26 are by Il'ia Efimovich Repin (see Note 3)

²⁷ *The Attack of the Jews by the Inquisition (Napadenie inkvizitsii na evreev)* (1863–1869).

²⁸ *Ivan Groznyi* (1870). On Antokol'skii see Note 3

²⁹ *Boiarynia Morozova* (1870).

³⁰ *Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy (Utro streletskoi kazni)* (1881). On Surikov see Note 3.

³¹ Makovskii, Vladimir Egorovich (1846–1920). Russian genre painter.

the entire large group walked out of the Academy, casting aside rewards and honours as well as the allure of trips abroad.³² This courageous artistic ‘mutiny’ led first to the formation of an ‘artistic cooperative’ (*artel*)³³, or ‘artistic commune’, and subsequently, to the ‘Association of Itinerant Exhibitions’. But all these matters and events are long since past. Now new forms are expected, which will respond to present, rather than previous, demands.

Even seventy years ago, in 1836, our brilliant artist Aleksandr Ivanov³⁴ wrote that ‘the Academy of Arts is a thing of the previous (the eighteenth) century. It was founded and devised by Italians who had run out of creativity. They wanted to elevate art to a high plane once more, but since that time they have not created a single genius ... In a high-standing embroidered collar all one can do is stand with an outstretched neck ...’. But even more important and interesting is why this same brilliant artist wrote to his father at the same time: ‘You suppose that a salary of six to eight thousand until death, and getting a nice little nook in the Academy, is great bliss for an artist, while I think that it is his total misfortune. An artist must be utterly free, never subservient to anything, and his independence must be boundless. Always observing nature, always living in the depths of the quiet life of the mind, he must select and extract what is new from everything gathered together and everything he has seen. The Russian artist must without fail travel frequently around Russia, and almost never be in Petersburg, since it is a city which has nothing characteristic about it.’ This is what the great Russian artist thought and wrote seventy years ago, and what was made public in print twenty-five years ago (1880). This was the genuine artistic covenant of the Russian artist, the great precepts of a covenant. But no one wanted to know this covenant, and they did not know it, and were ignorant of it. Ivanov’s words were the voice of a man singing in the wilderness. Only now has their time perhaps come. It may be that salary, and rank, and rewards, and medals, and uniforms, and caps with cockades, and state apartments, and various governing clerks of the Treasury and vice-presidents, will roll away and vanish forever, if all this is really merely damaging to art and the artist. We will wait and see what the future ‘Union of Artists’ decides. But it would seem that we may assume with increasing certainty that the ‘Union’ will above all and before all else concern itself with the resolution of three questions: 1) the freedom of the arts; 2) the freedom of the artist; and 3) the freedom of

³² For further information on this rebellion against the Academy see the item [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)

³³ *Artel* or ‘cooperative’ was the term used for their new organization by the group of artists who broke away from the Academy in 1863.

³⁴ 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

the work of art. All three subjects have been forgotten and scorned until now, just as they have been with literature too. Even under Catherine II Radishchev³⁵ was exiled to Siberia for his book, and his book was destroyed; Novikov³⁶ was imprisoned on trumped-up charges in the Schlüsselberg Fortress³⁷; the comedy *Woe from Wit* was for many decades banned from print as a criminal and seditious comedy; *The Government Inspector*³⁸ was designated for prohibition; Chaadaev³⁹ was declared insane for his ‘Philosophical Letter’, and for a substantially lengthy period during his exile he received daily visits from a physician and a policeman; and for a very long time the works of Herzen and Lev Tolstoi remained unknown to the majority of Russian people.

In just such a way a great number of works of art have long been concealed from Russian society (the most striking examples of this are a host of works by Ge⁴⁰ and Vereshchagin); whole swathes of subjects from Russian life and history in paintings, drawings and sculpture were, and remain, utterly inaccessible for the Russian artist, sometimes even more so than for the Russian man of letters. All these strange insanities and absurdities, these prejudices, comic fears and malicious constraints, will of course collapse like cliffs shattering from an explosion, and they will cease to exist forever. We cannot but eagerly await this.

³⁵ Radishchev, Aleksandr Nikolaevich (1749-1802). Russian writer and social critic.

³⁶ Novikov, Nikolai Ivanovich (1744-1818). Russian writer.

³⁷ A fortress prison near St Petersburg.

³⁸ Play (1836) by Nikolai Gogol’.

³⁹ Chaadaev, Petr Iakovlevich (1794-1856). Russian writer and thinker.

⁴⁰ Ge (sometimes rendered as Ghe), Nikolai Nikolaevich (1831-94). Russian realist painter.