

Russian 19th Century Landscape Painting; Love of the Land

Background Notes

Jane Angelini – 8 March 2017



Savrasov, *The Rooks Have Come Back*, 1871



WAHG

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk

Russian Landscape Painting 1830 – 1910

When Peter the Great founded his new capital city, his “window on the west”, at the start of the 18th century, Russia was politically, economically and culturally backward in comparison with other European countries. Other than rather stale icon painters, there was no “school” of Russian painters as such. Peter’s idea and the one followed by his successors in the 18th century, was to import foreigners who would both paint for the court and teach aspiring Russian artists. The Imperial Academy of Arts was founded in St Petersburg in 1753 and this created a system, a conduit, whereby artists were trained in the appropriate genres of portraiture and historical painting, largely by foreign teachers, the most successful given travel grants to study in Europe and regular academy exhibitions were held where paintings were sold. All paintings belonging to this period are heavily influenced by European conventions. Genre painting did not emerge until the first quarter of the 19th century and landscape painting did not develop beyond conventional dictates until the middle of the century. When landscape painting emerged as a part of mainstream art, backed by the academies, it found immediate popularity. It struck a chord with the prevailing intellectual atmosphere where there was an urge to create a national art, less dependent on European conventions, a school of Russian art which represented the spirit of the motherland. Mid 19th century Russia was a period of ferment, politically and culturally. It saw the rise of a class of “intelligentisia”, intellectuals, thinkers, critics, writers, musicians and artists, who challenged much of the status quo, particularly the stuffy academies. In literature Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, all explored the “Russian canvas” and in the musical field a mini revolution took place when musicians from Glinka onwards broke away from European conventions. The “mighty five”: Glinka, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorsky, and Cesar Cui, proclaimed their purpose to compose and popularize Russian national traditions in classical music.

It is against this backdrop of a growing sense of nationalism, that Russian landscape painting developed in the 19th century. European influences can be detected in the techniques used by all Russian landscapists, for example German Romanticism, the French “Barbizon” group, the Dusseldorf school of landscape artist, English landscape painting (notably Constable and

Turner), the “French Impressionists”. These cross currents are normal but whereas at the start of the century the subject matter used was European, (typically views of Rome or Naples), by the mid century this had all changed. There was a conscious striving to create images that reveal the essence of the Russian countryside and to portray what made it unique and loveable. Landscape artists began creating a portraiture of their country (perhaps that is the essential role of landscape painting?). A vast overwhelmingly rural country Russia encompasses huge mountain ranges, immeasurable Steppe, the frozen North and sultry Mediterranean South, giant areas of boreal forest, thousands of rivers and lakes, and expanses of desert. From the mid 19th century Russian painters started to explore their country and its extraordinarily diverse and beautiful terrains. As well as travelling in Europe they spent months, even years, in different regions of their own country studying, feeling and interpreting the landscape. A very popular destination was the Russian North, carpeted in forests, woven with lakes and rivers, and with a vast horizon line. Colonies of landscapists used to gather on Lake Onega in the summer to explore the changing skies and views, study the trees, the seasons and learn to paint *en plein air*. Others went further north to the arctic island of Solovki, one of the most enigmatic landscapes. The Volga is almost synonymous with Russia and unsurprisingly most landscapists were drawn to the Volga, often staying there for long periods in order to better understand the river, its annual cycle, its moods. The Russian Steppe (so consummately described by Chekhov) drew artists who tended to see something romantic, unfettered in the large plains of rye and lavender. The special light found in the Crimea, attracted others.

During the course of the two talks I will begin by exploring the emergence of landscape painting in the 19th century recognising that earliest paintings are classical “European” rather than “Russian” in spirit and often in subject matter. Examples : **Matveev** (1758 – 1856), **Schedrin**, (1791 – 1830) both classical landscapists, working in the first half of the century. **Aivazovsky** (1817 – 1900) is Russia’s undisputed marine painter, widely acclaimed abroad and technically brilliant. An accomplished painter he does not express anything notably “ Russian”.



Shishkin, *Morning in the Pine Forest*, 1878



Levitan, *The Lake, Rus*, 1899



Nesterov, *Silence*, 1903



Fedor Vasilev, *The Thaw*, 1871

Venetsianov (1870-1847) marks the first big change. He introduces the Russian peasant as part of the landscape at just the right moment when the common people or “narod” were held up as the true carrier of national spirit and Russian distinctiveness (like the German volk). Venetsianov and his followers were searching for the lost paradise of the naïve wisdom of rural existence and his paintings reflect this. He is the first to make a study of light. Venetsianov also trained others to paint, especially talented serfs, and was granted permission to teach landscape genre as a sub division of the academy of arts. Two of the serfs he trained, **Soroka** (1823- 1864) and **Kryllov**, became established artists, both creating still, charged images, where there is a strong sense of something greater, even sublime, within the image.

Savrasov (1830-1897) studied at the Moscow School of Painting. Later he took on the Landscape Studio at the Moscow School of Painting and Sculpture where he was to teach for the next 25 years. Greatly admired Constable. Later influenced by the French Barbizon school. Early paintings are infused with romanticism. By the 1870’s he started to paint lyrical, mood landscapes. He discovered in the day-to-day realities of Russian scenery a natural means of involvement in the life of his people. His painting, “The Rooks Have Returned”, is sometimes called Russia’s first “mood landscape”.

Vasilyev(1850-1873) A precocious but tragic figure who died aged twenty three but left a prodigious legacy and was widely considered the most gifted painter of his generation. An admirer of the Barbizon school . He developed a preoccupation with landscapes of strong, emotional moods in a frequently sketchy technique. He depicts the countryside with an over-riding concern for artistic and aesthetic considerations , for impromptu effects of light and tone.

Shishkin (1832-1898) trained in Moscow and St Petersburg, winning highest awards and later took over from Savrasov as head of the Landscape Studio at the Moscow School of Painting and Sculpture. Time spent in Dusseldorg acquainted him with influential Dusseldorf school of landscape painting, notably with Achenbach. Shishkin’s aspiration for ‘authenticity, similarity and a portrait—like quality in the representation of nature’ was already

in evidence in his earliest work. He became famous for his meticulously painted forest landscapes ; trees, groves, shrubs, forest animals all take on a poetic dimension. His high definition finish represents the apogee of realist landscape painting.

Kuindzhi (1842-1910) He stands apart from his contemporaries as a maverick, a glorious exception, the Russian Turner. He was largely self taught and rejected by the academies. The concerns that dominate his work are: a delight in unorthodox colour, the commonplace made mysterious, almost alien but poetic. Forms of nature are simplified, trees and bushes are the opposite to Shishkin's precisely executed foliage. Houses seem to be sculpted by light rather than drawn, mood and colour have a theatrical effect. His influence on Russian art was ubiquitous, the almost abstract nature of his designs paving the way for the decorative and geometric elements of modern Russian art.

Polenov (1844-1927) studied at St Petersburg Academy. He travelled extensively in Europe. Particularly interested in the Barbizon school. From 1870 he concentrated on landscape works in the tradition of Savrasov and Vasilyev, searching for the still silent poetry within the landscape, He is the first to start painting *en plein air* and to develop the use of fresh colours. A friend of Turgenev and his painting sometimes reflects Turgenev's prose.

Levitan (1860-1900) studied in Moscow and St Petersburg. He travelled extensively abroad and was certainly familiar with French Impressionism at first hand. He worked at a period when Russian culture in all spheres was flourishing. His contemporaries were Repin and Surikov, Nesterov and Serov, Chekhov and Gorky, Chaliapin and Yermolova. In his short creative life Levitan produced about a thousand paintings, pastels and drawings and is Russia's best loved landscape artist and the one who most consummately creates a portraiture of Russia. He was a close friend of Chekhov and his work often mirrors Chekhov's prose.

Nesterov (1862-1942) Although not primarily a landscape artist he is deeply concerned with the portraiture of Russia. The mystical union between the Russians, their, religion and their land.



Kuindzhi, *Morning on the Dnieper*, 1881



Polenov, *Golden Autumn*, 1880