

## **Russian art museums**

On Sundays when I had free time, I often visited art museums. In Moscow, Russian art is permanently on display at the State Tretyakov Gallery and the new State Tretyakov Gallery which is equivalent to an annex to the State Tretyakov Gallery and Western art is on display at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. In Saint Petersburg, Russian art is on display to the public at the Russian Museum and Western art at the Hermitage Museum.

For the first half of my time in Moscow, the State Tretyakov Gallery was closed for renovation. Going into 1992, the new building finally opened, and some exhibits could be seen, but all the facilities, including the old building, were opened to the public only in 1994, after I had returned to Japan. For this reason, the first museum I visited to look at Russian paintings when I was living in Moscow was the new State Tretyakov Gallery in the same building as the Central Artists' House, which is opposite Gorky Park across the Sadovaya inner loop road. On permanent display there are paintings after the October Revolution, including some contemporary pieces, mostly works at the time of the Stalin regime. In the course of my several visits, a glorified atmosphere of the personality cult in several pieces, where Stalin was portrayed, became quite cloying indeed, and I passed by these pieces without stopping, but on the whole, is exhibited a full sequence of valuable works which bridges a gap between Russian art from the latter half of the 19th century and contemporary Russian paintings. In addition, there is a large hall for special exhibition where in order to commemorate a special anniversary from the date of the birth etc. for one of the notable artist who passed away long ago, the special exhibition devoted to the celebrated artist is held from time to time. Only at the time of such exhibits a long line of art-loving Russian would form in this usually empty museum, and you have to get prepared to spend two or three hours in line before your entry.

I was blessed with opportunities to see several of these special exhibits during my time in Moscow, and above all, a one-person exhibit of the landscape artist Arkhip Kuindzhi (1842 – 1910), active in the latter half of the 19th century, was particularly impressive. In this special exhibition held in August 1992 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth, I for the first time in my life came into contact with his works, and besides, a large number of his works specially brought together. And his beautiful, persuasive depictions of the countryside of northern Russia and Ukraine, together with

large compositions and wide fields of vision, made a very deep impression on me, touching my heart.

The first impression which I received from Kuindzhi's works is how excellently light and the air are depicted, and even at a glance you can see that they are extremely good paintings, in which not only beauty, but also the natural atmosphere such as grandeur, quietness, and in some cases even mystery are felt. If you look at several pieces at one time, you'll understand that Kuindzhi brought the effects of light into focus to make the beauty of nature more prominent and thus expressed in his works how scenery could look enhanced with these effects of light. Kuindzhi was fond of taking up the scenes with light shining from the rear or some distant background, such as in the twilight or at night with a full moon, and there a beautiful world beyond description was laid out with unique color tones highlighted by light and shadow in the backlight composition. I'd like to herewith introduce one of such pieces, his farewell work of *Night Grazing* (1905-08).

In *Night Grazing* is depicted a scene where a herd of horses put to pasture at night is resting on the slightly elevated bank of a river during the time of white night. The background is occupied by a fantastic light shining brightly from behind the horizon, and from the background to the middle of the scene this brilliance gently illuminates the high sky with crescent moon or the earth and the river streaming leisurely towards the right side of the foreground from the middle of the horizon. In the foreground, the herd of horses on the left bank—grazing or resting here and there on the grasses—is depicted with dark colors rich in nuances in the shade of the backlit composition. Above all, the excellence of this painting is in the beautiful brilliance of white night, which is colored by the radiance of this fantastic light splendidly beyond description; the scene ruled by this brilliance is incredibly beautiful, fresh and unconstrained as if we saw a quite different world. The hues of the reflection on the river surface and the figures of the horses which stand still at the summit of the bank and look just like silhouette against the backlight horizon are quite impressive.

Kuindzhi used tar for the undercoat of his paintings, with the aim of keeping the pictures in good condition for a long time, and it is said that this caused chemical changes to darken his paintings in many years. This means that *Night Grazing* originally had brighter color tones. Nevertheless we can understand that the novel

colors emphasizing the contrast of light with shade are satisfactorily shown in this work as well. For 5 years or so from 1874, when he began showing his pieces at the exhibits of the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions, these pieces with an even more conspicuous brightness due to his composition contrasting light with shade had a significant impact, and he drew attention as an artist, while at the same time he seemed unable to garner the support of his fellow artists in the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions because of his style of painting that tended towards romanticism and his fantastic, rather unrealistic color tones to support it, with emphasizing the contrast between light and shade. Perhaps it might serve as one of reasons that he lived a secluded life shrouded in mystery for the thirty years from 1880 until his death, and the five hundred oil paintings and approximately three hundred line drawings and so on he produced during this time were, with a few exceptions, first shown to the public by his pupils after his death.

Kuindzhi's bright, novel colors were inherited by students such as Arkady Rylov (1870–1939), Nicholas Roerich (1871–1947) and others, but to gain a true understanding of Kuindzhi's paintings that were so ahead of his time, one had to wait for the arrival of the era when these students were active in full scale. Kuindzhi's style is nowadays identified as neo-romanticism.

I go back a little bit retroactively. From 1990 on I periodically went to the State Tretyakov Gallery. However, I found it still closed each time and returned home disappointed. That's why I all the more felt joyful excitement when I entered into the museum for the first time after the new building opened in January or February of 1992. Religious icons were displayed in the first hall, and in next order were oil paintings focusing on portraits from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century.

My purpose was paintings from the latter half of the 19th century, chiefly landscape, but because only the new building was open to the public, just a few of these works were on display, about enough to adorn one hall. The portraits of Mussorgsky and Tretyakov (founder of the gallery) by Ilya Repin, Ivan Kramskoi's portrait of *an Unknown Woman* or portraits of Lev Tolstoy and Ivan Shishkin (landscape painter), and Vasily Perov's portrait of Dostoyevsky, all the name of which is known also in Japan, and so on were on the walls, and these are masterpieces of portraiture worth seeing, and besides these, I was able to see just more than forty

landscapes. Of these, particularly impressive were Vasily Polenov's *Early Snowfall* and three pieces by Isaac Levitan.

As a painter of the Abramtsevo school and the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions, Polenov (1844–1927) was active in the latter half of the 19th century, and there are a number of small pieces reproducing the wonderful beauty of Russian nature among his landscapes from the latter half of '80s to the first half of '90s.

This *Early Snowfall* (1891) is one of these, an oblong work showing an endless, bleak field in the season when snow starts to fall. From the foreground to the middle, about one fourth of the canvas from right side is taken up by a snowy field with the islands of dried grasses, and the remaining part toward the left side becomes a snowy slope down to the river covered with a cluster of deciduous trees and a thicket of dark reddish-brown bushes, over which you see the lead-colored river, while the snowy opposite shore rising slightly turns around to the right along the river, and further away to the deep background, the wild field spotted with snow extends to the blue-tinged horizon touching the dull and stagnant, cold sky. Thus the beautiful deep figure of nature is depicted in the piece. From this scene portrayed in detail by a sense of reality with the vivid, cold color hues, we can acutely feel the amazing beauty of this desolate, wild Russian landscape. Although this is a relatively small painting with the size 44 x 84 cm, it is a masterpiece that nowadays testifies to Polenov's extraordinary artistic talent direct to us.

As for the landscapes of Levitan(1860–1900), I saw it the first time on a bus headed for Suzdal, an old city that prospered from the latter half of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th century. However, of course, it was not the original painting I saw, but the photo of painting with the title *Vladimir* printed in a Suzdal tourist brochure. One Sunday in July 1991 I took part in a day trip to Suzdal organized by Japan Club in Moscow, a private organization of Japanese residents in Moscow. When we approached Vladimir, the guide speaking Japanese explained this piece, telling us that about a hundred years before, an artist named Levitan had painted the beauty of the roads in this area, introducing it to the people of Moscow. Listening to this, I turned the pages of the brochure to look at the work, and my eyes got glued to the beauty of the scene. I thought that if just a photograph could be so attractive, then the actual painting must be truly amazing and looked at it once again.

In the vicinity of Vladimir, even now, large fields spread out on both sides of the road, and the traces of the time when the painting was done markedly remain. In such

natural features several pathways of naked earth built up by people passing through the middle of the field become into one wide main road, which stretches out into the distance. To describe it briefly, the aforementioned is the scene depicted in the painting. (What I learned later was that this road was formerly called Vladimir Road, and when exiles and prisoners were taken to Siberia on foot, they always took the course through this road. That's why Levitan likely painted this road, putting his pathos in it.) Because of his ability, by dint of which he created this piece with the amazingly high artistic level, Levitan's name has been tied with *Vladimir* and firmly imprinted on my mind since that time. The first of his works I encountered at the State Tretyakov Gallery were *Evening Bells*, *Twilight* and *The Lake*; each of these was full of soul, and these high artistic levels did not betray my expectations. I would like to introduce *Evening Bells* here.

*Evening Bells* (1892) is full of a meditative poetic sentiment, and it can be said to have expressed the calm, peaceful, spiritual world of the church in a landscape. The painting depicts a group of white-walled churches surrounded by virgin forest on the opposite bank of the curving river as if they were divided by the river from the secular world. The churches stand, in a tranquil atmosphere, against an evening sky with fleecy clouds floating across in the twilight while the bells are ringing to tell the beginning of evening devotions. In this very moment a ferry boat full of pious villagers comes to the middle of the river, and two monks stand quietly welcoming them to that sacred place on the opposite bank. There is a ferry landing in the foreground, and the artist's view extends from the rear of this landing over to the opposite shore with the churches and into the background. The churches and the surrounding nature are illuminated by a gentle light of the setting sun, the calm color tones of which give off a deep quiet, and the reflection shown on the river surface makes this stillness all the more rich. One can imagine that the ringing of the prayer bells is being heard as if it was nearly absorbed by the stillness. A lonely person sits at the stern of the ferry boat moored on the left of the landing, contemplating as if he turns his ear to the sound of the bells, and this figure, seemingly a fisherman, as well as the appearance of the churches and the two monks symbolize the calm and quiet mood of this piece. This is the piece that makes us feel a composed, satisfactory state of the artist's soul, and is the excellent work focusing on the beautiful Russian landscape that relaxes the heart.

By the way, the Russian art in general, including literature, music, and fine art

rapidly rose to new heights during the period of a little more than 100 years from the second quarter of the 19th century, even becoming one of the highest artistic levels in the world. (In more than the first half of the mentioned 100 years or so poets, composers, painters, novelists and so forth on a world level who by far excel any forerunners before their times came into being one after another, and then, for less than its second half from the end of the 19th century till the 1930s, artistic thought took on the aspect of swift currents, with many schools being quickly replaced in the interval of only several years. In praise of such intensive boost of the arts in general, Russian, in the time of Soviet regime in particular, used to call the former a Golden Age and the latter a Silver Age.) Although these works took in the romanticism that was the artistic trend in Europe of the time and the realism which followed after that, it seems that this era was unique in the history of world art with regard to how extensively and highly the arts in general were boosted in an intensive manner.

What is often pointed out is that the history of world literature is filled with names such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorky, and on this tradition world-class literary masters continue to be produced till now.

In the world of music, to give some examples of composers, there is probably no one in Japan who does not hear of Glinka, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov. Also Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich made their marks on the history as great masters of the 20th century.

The world of fine art also is definitely no exception from this. However, for more than seventy years since the October Revolution the former Soviet Union had been, as it were, in the midst of a national isolation, and important works of fine art had been almost never taken out of the country, so their existence was almost unknown not only in Japan but also in Europe and North America. Because of this, most people, with few exceptions, even among Japanese intellectuals with a deep knowledge of the fine arts do not think there is anything worth seeing in Russian art and it is not unreasonable. No matter how many masterpieces there might be or how many reproductions of such masterpieces you will see in photos and the like, the actual, original work of art is the life of the piece, unlike in literature or music. If you do not see the original directly, you are not only unable to judge the value of the piece precisely in strict meaning, but also the real evaluation of the artist won't be

established unless you have the opportunity to repeatedly appreciate his works systematically over a long period. Even if the Russian art exhibitions held two or three times in the past won praise, and favorable criticism from art critics followed every time, it seems that such degree was not enough to change the situation and they had no choice but to be forgotten in time and excluded from the object of serious evaluation.

However, the era of the Cold War which had lasted for more than 40 years finally ended, and it has now shifted to an era of international cooperation, and so if these works of high artistic value are to be systematically introduced to the West in an organized manner in future, I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that, in the course of continuation of attempt upon attempt, artists earning high praise just as Chagall and Kandinsky who found success after they moved to the West will appear one after another and appropriately fill in the blank space in Western art history.

If we think about why Russian literature and art overall could see such a rapid uplift in the aforesaid period, we come to understand that Russia which had been isolated from the development of the Western history because of Mongol rule for 250 years since the beginning of the 13th century was forced to get into the political and cultural sphere of Europe in the 17th century and on, and push ahead with the westernization from the need to rank with neighboring great powers such as Sweden and Poland, testing the limit of their ability desperately to make the lag up in national power. We might say that the uplift of literature and art was born in the course of the bold efforts of intellectuals who, having absorbed the spirit of European civil society, attempted to make up for the lag of Russian society from the standpoint of modern civil society, and went beyond social status or interests, abandoning everything for the spiritual work of social reform.

Tracing the cause of this uplift of literature and art back to the past, we can find a foundation for this art development in the thorough westernization policies of Peter the Great (reign 1682–1725) and the same flow of the westernization that were maintained by his successors for a certain period of time. Along with the introduction of Western technology for increasing wealth and military power and also due to the need to increase the prestige of the nation, western culture came into Russia gradually. Then a base was being created through the accumulation of study and training and



after a while, a soil in which great talent might sprout was made ready. In reality, before any great talent could sprout in this soil, a period of study of about a century and a half from the reforms of Peter the Great was necessary. However, needless to say, the uplift of literature and art which made great leaps forward from the times of the predecessors does not only mean that these talented people, who had absorbed the fruits of this accumulated training, naturally attained it on this base only by fully utilizing their talents for this purpose.

To understand the background for why this was possible, we must take into consideration the fact that the Russian soil sowed with the seeds of Western culture was unique. What I mean by saying this soil was unique is all sorts of backwardness of the Russian absolute monarchy which laid its foundations on the serfdom. Because of this backwardness, the westernization was necessary in Russia, but paradoxically, this advanced Western culture resulted in lightening the backwardness of the old system. On this occasion, rather than endeavoring to overcome this social delay, the regime taking the course of the westernization conversely covered it up, which hindered the true modernization of Russia, and therefore, inevitably was repeated the contradiction that the people having embodied the western culture, which should be regarded as by-products of the westernization, were frowned as thinkers of dangerous thoughts and ejected from society. This contradiction became radicalized in the regime of Catherine the Great (reign 1762-1796) and in the period succeeding to it, when the flow of Russian history went on toward the opposite trend of the stream of European history.

Under the enlightened cultural policies of an excellent enlightenment despot, Catherine the Great, the writing and publishing activities flourished and the ideas of French civil society with its basic principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity took root among progressive intellectuals. The uplift of literature and art which began later in Pushkin's time owes a great deal to Catherine the Great's enlightened cultural policies. If she had not existed, the boost of Russian art would likely have been put off much later, on much smaller scale, and of an absolutely different nature in various interwoven factors of history. Catherine the Great, who realized the seriousness of the seeds sowed by her own just after the outbreak of the French revolution, switched to the reaction to oppress severely progressive intellectuals. From that point on, they were forced to live a life of agony in lonely speculation for several generations and, at



times, risked their lives to heroically tread a thorny path. In the end, however, the contradiction to keep on putting a lid on Russia's backwardness was transformed into the energy to resolve it. The more the resolution was suppressed by force, the more energy accumulated as if you were drawing a bow to the full and before long, it turned into big energy of the era, which exploded as the form of the uplift of literature, music and fine art in the world of art.

To tell the conclusion first, creating high artistic level of works was only possible by such a strenuous process that the talented people in these progressive intellectual groups, who had been annoyed by an injustice and contradiction arising from the backwardness, thought thoroughly in a fundamental way about people and society, referring to the movement of the western history in the midst of specific soils of Russia. They were able to have the common objective of social reform to overcome Russian backwardness and under this objective focused their energy to work hard by encouraging and competing with one another. Such mechanism of improving themselves personally functioned more extensively and we can conceive it as the reason why the masters of art appeared in many numbers one after another and not merely alone.

A group of young officers belonging to progressive noble intellectuals who chased after the French army that was getting back from Moscow in the Napoleonic Wars and entered into Europe was faced with the advanced society of the West and fully realized they could not just leave the backwardness of Russia as it was. This growing sense of crisis compelled them to establish a secret association putting forward a platform for the abolition of serfdom and a constitutional monarch, which soon developed into an underground political movement, finally leading to "Decembrist revolt" (1825), called the first bourgeois revolution in Russia. The revolt resulted in failure, but nevertheless this revolutionary movement exerted a great influence on the direction of thinking of progressive intellectuals later. They perceived the serf system and the absolute monarchy supporting it as the sources of Russian backwardness, and taking it seriously that the half done reform from above pertaining to the abolishment of the serfdom, rather than liberating the people, conversely plunged the lives of peasants into even more severe poverty and disorder, they groped for a solution, contemplating how to make Russia better, how oppressed people and moreover all of humanity as well could be happy. Through this groping, the talented writers and artists of them, each on his individual base, strongly reflecting the social aspects in their works, have established a unique and highly purified Russian realism art imbued with

the scent of the earth and the color of tragedy.

In painting, it is said that this realism art, roughly speaking, began with the dawn period of the 1840s, went through the development stage of the 1850s and '60s and then matured during the period from the '70s until the beginning of the '90s. This matured period, during the course of which Russian realism painting had obtained the truly advanced artistic content, was brought about by an avant-garde movement putting forward the cause of the social reforms. It began when Ivan Kramskoi and other artists established the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions in 1870 and they held their first exhibition in Saint Petersburg on November 19 of the following year. By the way, this exhibition preceded the first impressionist painting exhibition in Paris by more than two years. This was the opening of a golden age for Russian art.

Since the art exhibits itinerated around Russian and Ukrainian cities with the objectives of enlightenment and expanding markets for their work, the members and exhibitors were referred to as the artists of the Itinerant Exhibitions. (Taking the meaning of the Russian word "itinerant," the artists of the Itinerant Exhibitions are often translated as the Itinerants in Japan, but since the essential idea is the artists who take part in itinerating exhibitions, I refer to them as the Itinerant Exhibitors.) All the authors of the works I have referred to up to now, Kramskoi, Shishkin, Kuindzhi, Polenov, and Levitan were members of the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions. Other famous Union artists were Vasily Perov, Nikolai Ge, Ivan Aivazovsky, Alexei Savrasov, Feodor Vasilyev, Ilya Repin, Vasily Surikov, Nikolai Yaroshenko and so on.

The Itinerant Exhibitors laid the foundations for their movement on ideological principles from the revolutionary democratic movement "v narod" (meaning "going to the people"), which saw a ground swell with the abolition of the serfdom in 1861 and the development of capitalism, producing quite many masterpieces of realism art depicting the social contradictions, the wretchedness and toughness of the people or a landscape beauty with a tasteful atmosphere and a poetic sentiment.

In the fall of 1992, I visited Saint Petersburg several times to see paintings of the Itinerant Exhibitors and others. It was a short itinerary: I would leave Moscow on the Red Arrow night train on Friday and arrive the following morning at my destination. I would then go around to the museums during the day and then get on the night train to return to Moscow Sunday morning. When I first visited Saint Petersburg like this, I

happened to meet a Japanese acquaintance in the State Russian Museum entry hall. He was the head representative in Russia of my client company and when he noticed me, rather than greeting me, he said simply, “Mr. Ishii, wonderful paintings here.” I came here after I looked at the French impressionist paintings and so on at the Hermitage Museum, while he had just finished looking around the State Russian Museum and was on his way out. His cheeks were flushed because his heart had been moved by the paintings, and his laughing eyes sparkled and glinted like a young boy. Probably he is a man who loves art with all his heart. The expression on his face and the magnificence of the paintings I saw afterward have been linked together and engraved on my memory.

The State Russian Museum was established in 1898 when the Mikhailovsky Palace, built at the start of the 19th century by the Italian architect Rossi, was converted into a museum, and therefore the exhibition halls are large with high ceilings. Indeed there are rooms illuminating rather dark, but on the whole it is a museum with good viewing conditions, where I had the opportunity to appreciate quite a lot of excellent exhibits divided by era, from religious icons to abstract paintings. Of the many paintings that left a deep impression on me, it is the works by Aivazovsky, Repin, and Surikov that I would like to mention here as particularly impressive ones.

Aivazovsky (1817 – 1900) was already a prominent romantic seascape painter in the 1830s. But honestly speaking, I did not like his works so much. Although I got the impression only by looking at an album of his paintings, I felt something a little bit artificial and old-fashioned in some of his works with the backlight compositions full of beam from a full moon in the distance which we can often see among his pieces.

I was, however, astonished by *Billow*, the large scale piece I saw for the first time at the State Russian Museum. The longer I looked at it, the more I felt compelled to take my hat off to its excellence. The size is extraordinary. On a large canvas of 304 by 505 cm it is depicted that in a boisterous, stormy sea a wrecked ship and the sailors who managed to escape from it are being toyed with between the waves, which is depicted so realistically that you would feel yourself in threatening danger. The power of the surging waves is further intensified by the large scale of the canvas, in which there's no wasted portrayal. Faced with the fury of nature, I could only be overwhelmed and was rooted to the spot.

Since the occasion of this experience, I have re-evaluated Aivazovsky. This piece was produced in 1889. My initial impression of several of his pieces produced up to

1860 was not changed greatly by my shocking experience in looking at *Billow*. However, as far as I understand, wonderfully Aivazovsky continued to show his talent till his later years and became even a greater painter by attaining through his long life an even higher artistic level in his own seascapes.

Repin (1844–1930) is a great painter who is often quoted to as the Leo Tolstoy of painting and breaking new ground in genre picture, historical painting, portraiture, and landscape, he is said to have made a great contribution to the realism paintings of the 1870s and 1880s.

Of his works at the State Russian Museum, *the Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan* (1880–91) is probably the best part of his masterpieces and made a very deep impression on me. Zaporizhia is situated on the Dnieper River about 500 kilometers southeast of Kiev and the Ukrainian Cossacks living there were famous for their bravery and full of self-reliant, independent spirit, having formed an autonomous self-governed organization on their own, similar to the Russian Cossacks of the basins of the Don and Volga Rivers. This piece is a historical painting taking as its subject the 17<sup>th</sup> century's historical fact that the Sultan forced these Zaporozhian Cossacks to obey, the theme of which is the brave and bold independent spirit of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

The Cossacks are writing their reply to the Sultan at a table outdoors. In the center of the canvas, a secretary sits at the table and around him, the ataman (head) with a pipe in his mouth and other strong men are standing or sitting at the table, watching the secretary write the letter. The letter is likely being dictated by the ataman and judging from the appearance that everyone's focus is directed to the secretary's hand, it seems that the secretary is slowly taking this dictation while murmuring the words back parrot-like. This reply, dodging the demand for submission, was likely full of humor. Everyone is delighted and laughing loudly. On the large canvas of 203 by 358 cm such a scene is portrayed with high-density and strong power. There is a sense of imposing weight in the richly colored portrayal of the group of Cossacks, along with an overwhelming sense of reality. Each of the Cossacks is a living human being and we see in the expression of brave and fearless looks marked with individualities

respectively a strong will to give their lives for freedom and honor. In this piece is depicted one scene from the lives of the Cossacks, and we feel a persuasive power that the truth is realistically portrayed there. This piece is, no doubt, one of his best works, into which Repin had poured his heart and soul and completed after spending twelve years of his life on it.

Surikov (1848 – 1916) is a master of historical paintings, ranking in the same like position with Repin. He left a lot of masterpieces penetrated by his outstanding talent and transcendent historical viewpoint, including *Morning of the Streltsy Execution* and *Boyarynia Morozova*. In the State Russian Museum were displayed four large-scale pieces and others, of which I'd like to herewith refer to *Stepan Razin*.

In 1670–71 broke out a large-scale peasant revolt, so-called the Razin rebellion, headed by Stepan Razin, who had been the ataman of the Don Cossacks, in the lower and central regions of the Volga River. In this rebellion, serfs who had fled to the Don and Volga River regions to become lower-class Cossacks stood up and revolted because the Romanov dynasty, having been exhausted from the war with Poland which lasted over ten years from 1654, imposed heavy taxes, dealing a harsh final blow to the peasants.

*Stepan Razin* (1907) is a historical painting taking this Razin rebellion as its subject. A large rowboat with inflated sails makes its way up the Volga River under a gloomy fall sky. In this piece the boat and Stepan Razin in it are depicted in a decisively closed up manner in the canvas and in its center Razin sits, bored, with his back against the mast, his feet stretched out on the rug-covered deck, and supporting his head with his left hand, elbow of which is leaned on elbow rest. In the front part of the boat behind him, four soldiers on each side pull oars and in front of him, four retainers rest in the poses as they likes. To comfort Razin, one of these men, just ahead of him, is playing a balalaika, but Razin is not at all entertained. The gloomy, thoughtful look on his face presents a striking contrast to his high-ranked follower's laughing in the stern. He turns his strong eyes of the leader of a rebellion right towards us, gazing into the distance, in which we feel a hue of anxiety expressing his presentiment of the tragedy as well as his firm, deep determination of a person

sticking to his conviction. I will never forget these complicated expressions on his eyes.

It is exactly for this reason that I selected this work in particular from among four large-sized masterpieces of his. This work is, no doubt, in line with the historical paintings *Morning of Streltsy Execution* and *Boyarynia Morozova*, which tragically captured turning points in history from the side of ordinary people. We cannot see the opponent who he is gazing at, but obviously Razin is clearly depicted as a tragic hero rebelling against power to represent the hopes and suffering of the people, which is observed not only in the relation of the soldiers to Razin and his gaze, but also in the clouded, gloomy Russian fall and the restrained color tones of the portrayals of the figures. Surikov painted this piece in 1907. He likely overlapped the social instability in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, because of which the frequent peasant revolts took place in many regions. His portrayals of characters and mentality have a sense of reality and weight specific to Surikov, different from Repin's, which is clearly demonstrated in this piece as well. It's a splendid work worth seeing.

Well, speaking of Russian art in the latter half of the 19th century, we cannot make do without referring to Pavel Tretyakov and Savva Mamontov, two businessmen having made a great contribution to its development. Theirs is such a famous story in Russia that I would like to touch on it briefly here.

Tretyakov (1832 – 1898), when he was eighteen years old, together with his younger brother, took over the business in Moscow that his family had done for generations. Being an art lover, he firmly made up his mind, at his young age, to build a national art museum for Russian art in Moscow and he worked towards this goal throughout his entire life and finally achieved it while working hard for the family business. Having a sharp and discerning eye for paintings, he began his collection by obtaining some works of genre picture that did not generally have fixed evaluation in society at that time. He and the artists were connected together by mutual understanding and relationships of trust and cooperation; on one hand, the artists produced excellent works, while on the other, Tretyakov actively collected them for his future national art museum, which became a strong support to the development of paintings for the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions. Tretyakov ordered portraits of those people who represented Russian intelligence of the era to such artists as Kramoskoi,

Ge, Perov, and Repin, through which he promoted the development of portraiture. It is thanks to him that we are able to view in museums a great number of famous portraits of scholars, literary men, composers, artists and so on who were of people active in a variety of spheres of work in society of that period, and the majority of them were intellectuals from varied layers of society.

He established a museum in the garden of his own home in 1874, and expanded it three times as the collection grew. In 1881 he opened the museum to the general public and at the time of the fourth expansion in 1892 he gifted the museum with all his collection to the city of Moscow. With the aim to enrich the collection, he continued collecting pieces until his death in 1898, and the donated collection was well over 2000 pieces, including religious icons. (According to the publication of the State Tretyakov Museum, there was a total of 1897 pieces in the collection donated in 1892, including 1289 oil paintings and the number of oil paintings in the collection catalog Tretyakov himself created 4 months before he died had reached 1635 pieces.)

On the other hand, the achievements of the railroad industrialist Mamontov (1841 – 1918) consist in his having supported the creative activities of artists who, in the period of transition from realism art to fin-de-siècle art, were to develop in full bloom a different painting from style of realism to represent another side of Russia and thus having made serious contributions to the development of the Russian arts. An art lover having a taste for vocal music and theatre, he gathered artists, composers, and writers around him, forming a unique arts circle with conservative tendencies. The circle was called the Abramtsevo school after the fact that the group used for its summer arts activities the grand Abramtsevo summer house Mamontov had obtained from the noble Sergey Aksakov, a Slavic controversialist and novelist. Member artists included Viktor Vasnetsov, Mikhail Nesterov, Vasily Polenov, Ilya Repin, Valetin Serov, Konstantin Korovin, Mikhail Vrubel and others. Through the group's various activities, the artists groped for new means of expression, and from the 1880s to 1890s, they made public piece after piece brimming with the profound lyricism of ethnic hues and works with novel color sensations.

Although the artists of the Abramtsevo school asked the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions for a place to present their works, what they aimed at was a nostalgic reproduction of ethnic traditions, and it was different from the aims of the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions. While the realism art of the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions



followed a gradually declining path in the 1890s with setbacks in the “Narodnik” movement, the Abramtsevo school opened up new paths of expression and took on the role of building a bridge to connect with fin-de-siècle art. It is fair to say that this work was nurtured by the powerful support of Mamontov that continued over twenty years from the late 1870s.

One Sunday in March 1992, I drove out to Abramtsevo, which is located about eighty kilometers northeast of Moscow. I went on through Yaroslav Highway and turned left a little before Zagorsk (now Sergiyev Posad) and then keep following the street for another thirty kilometers or so. It was a pleasant surprise to me to find Yaroslav Highway was a splendid road unlike those within Moscow, wide and in good pavement condition (in Moscow, the roads were improved on the occasion of the city’s 850th anniversary celebration in 1997, having restored the honor of the capital city), but turning left from the main line, I was faced with many gravel roads and no road signs. I somehow reached Abramtsevo, getting lost from time to time and asking someone for direction.

It was a fine day, lovely weather. Snow remained on the expansive premises of Abramtsevo, now a museum, and the remaining snow cover on the roof melted, drops dripping from the eaves of the house. In addition to the house, I wandered around the grounds, looking at the pseudo-Russian style wooden workshop, a bath-cabin, the church Vasnetsov designed based on ancient Russian architecture and the traditional ceramic majolica pottery workshop restored by Vrubel. I was impressed by Vrubel’s peculiar majolica ceramic pieces and a display of traditional folk crafts collected mainly by Mamontov’s wife and Yelena Polenova, who was a woman painter and Polenov’s younger sister.

Just at that time, Moscow’s new State Tretyakov Gallery was holding an Abramtsevo exhibit, so I was only able to see a few pieces in some rooms of the house, including Repin’s still-life of autumn flowers. In fact, my visit to Abramtsevo was inspired by the new State Tretyakov Gallery’s special exhibition; then I wanted to see even just once the place where these artists spent so many years pursuing their art activities and giving birth to so many excellent pieces. Surrounded by dense woods, it looked to be the ideal environment for art activities. The artists had sketched the area,

leaving behind many pieces depicting the beautiful scenery. Even now, artists frequently visit Abramtsevo looking for subjects for their landscape.

The new State Tretyakov Gallery's Abramtsevo exhibition was held over three months starting in the spring of 1992, and I went to see it a number of times before and after my visit to Abramtsevo. Of the pieces that made an impression on me, I would like to introduce here Serov's *The Girl with Peaches* and Vrubel's *The Seated Demon*.

Serov (1865 – 1911) first studied paintings under Repin in his career as an artist. It was the first year of my stay in Moscow, or maybe the year after that, that I came across the small portrait sketches by teacher and student—about thirty of each—on display in contrast with each other at Manege (an exhibition hall) in front of the Kremlin. At that time I first learned they had been teacher and student. However, it was hard to decide which one is better than the other; both left me with the impression of being quite capable artists. At the Abramtsevo exhibit as well just like the aforesaid exhibition at Manege, very interesting pieces by each of them on the same object, still life with apples, *The Hunchback (Study)* and *Portrait of Sophia Dragomirova*, were on display.

*The Girl with Peaches* (1887) was done by Serov when he was twenty-two years old, and the model was Mamontov's young daughter. It was done in the dining room of the Abramtsevo house. The model wears a pink blouse with a scarf brooch that is black with white spots and a red flower pinned to it, sitting at a large dining table covered in a white tablecloth. Both her arms are on the table from the elbows, and she holds a peach in both hands. To her left, a knife is put beside her, and a bit diagonally from her, near the center of the table, are three peaches.

Serov portrayed this girl in light color tones as if she were wrapped up in light, expressing the healthy beauty of youth. Some feature of a childhood still remains in her healthy face, which is turned to the diagonally left so that she is looking directly at us, with her eyes cherishing a sincere spirit to look at things honestly. In the window behind her, the leaves of the trees in the garden can be seen shining in the sunlight, and a bright outside light shines into the room through this window. This light plays an important role in dominating the overall brightness of the piece, and the green garden seen through the window is an essential clue to her bright cheerfulness. The light from behind her provides a backlight composition and so the girl's expression should be darkly visible. However, the artist dares to sacrifice a realistic treatment of

light, and lets her expression, the most important part of this portrait, be brightly conspicuous just till the limit so that it would not look quite unnatural, in which we can feel his new method of portrayal. This piece, filled with sunlight, is said to have opened up new paths for art movement, a masterpiece demonstrating the natural artistic talent of the young Serov.

As a reaction to the setback of the Narodnik movement in the 1890s did arise the decadence literature, superhuman-oriented trends of literary thought despising the people and existing ideas, and it was Vrubel (1856–1910) that was quick to represent these trends in the world of art. Even among his contemporary artists having the marked individuality, he seems to have been a lone genius for paintings of a different profile. Maybe such impression comes from the fact that among all the Abramtsevo school artists, he was the only one expressing the peculiar decadent themes by the line drawing method of paintings with fantastical and varied color tones, which is quite different from the method of realism.

His *Seated Demon* (1890) has something common with Nietzsche's individualism. Vrubel, who set himself sharply against the existing society, intending to be the "superhuman", created in this piece the prototype of demon, based on which he obstinately continued producing a series of demons as a symbolic theme of his emotional expression. He took the materials for this prototype from Lermontov's epic poem "The Demon", in which the demon, a former angel chased out of Paradise, wandering the earth, doing all kinds of evil, arrived in Caucasus and fell in love at first sight with Tamara, the daughter of old Goudal living in a castle in the mountains. At that time, however, she was seated at her wedding ceremony and after casting a spell on her fiancé hurrying to the wedding on horseback, the demon led him to waver in his judgment and caused his death. Besides, the demon seduced and destroyed her. The atmosphere of this poem, full of a self-torturing Satanism and nostalgia for lost Paradise, is wonderfully expressed in this painting.

In reference to the demon portrayed in this piece, Vrubel wrote in a letter addressed to his younger sister, "Young, with wings on his naked back, in gloomy contemplation, this figure sits, putting arms around his knees against the sunset behind him, and looks at a flower garden that opens up into the forest." In this way, the demon sits surrounded by flowers in the center of the canvas, staring over his right

shoulder at a flower garden which is located toward the left side of the canvas and is not seen in the picture. The demon and the flowers around him are depicted with the line drawing style in the form of polyhedrons like cut gems, and the sunset glow shining in the distance on the left of the canvas dyes the surrounding sky in fantastical madder red color tones, leaving a mood of decadence hanging in the air. The eyes of the demon, gazing far away, are brimming with tears, and he keeps a gloomy silence, mourning the stigma of a demon destined to wander about on the earth. His naked upper body is quite muscular, befitting a “superhuman” demon, but the expression on his face captures a vacant moment of human-like repentance, the weak side of this demon.

By the way, in Vrubel’s series of pieces of demon, the demon in *Head of Demon* (1890–91), a work done a little after *The Seated Demon* as an illustration for Lermontov’s “The Demon”, also has a sad, human-like expression of looking for people’s understanding in vain. As Vrubel moved along to *Demon in Flight* (1899) and *Injured Demon* (1902), such a sentiment disappeared without a trace, changing into a desperate appearance and then the wretched, weak expression of the defeated. These figures of demons can be regarded as self-portraits symbolizing the respective stages of feelings of Vrubel who was sinking into madness without recognition of his excellent talent for painting during his lifetime.

Many of his pieces portrayed with the established, unique artistic style and magnificent colors is imbued with a feel of heavy appearance, giving the impression that realism runs through the bottom of his works, and the same can be said in *Seated Demon* as well. Vrubel has already earned a high evaluation in Russia, but I feel he will be one of the artists getting even higher and broader evaluation in future.