

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

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On Progress in Art<sup>1</sup>

We artists spend too little time studying, and if we do glance at some books, then we do so hurriedly and completely unsystematically, as if we think that a sound education is something totally unnecessary for the development of our gifts. It must be admitted that herein lies a major reason, if not the first reason, why art is unable to reach a fuller, richer stage of development; why it has so far been unable to rid itself of the thankless role of serving merely as the obedient and pleasant purveyor of delectation to society; why it has not yet managed to gain a position of primary significance in the aesthetic and—more importantly—the psychological development of mankind. Whereas in all other spheres of intellectual life one sees new ideas emerging along with the discovery of the means for their realisation and perfection, in art, and especially in sculpture and painting (and also to some extent in music), the old saying still holds sway: ‘The great masters did it this way, so we have to do it this way too’. One encounters progressive ideas in all subjects. Our views on the world are far removed from those that were held several centuries ago. The objects that we have created with our hands have changed, and have improved in implementation. Given that, one might have supposed that in the sphere of art, for example in painting, any new idea or more lifelike and natural style would be possible. But no! One constantly encounters the claim that ‘not only in terms of perfection, but also in terms of conceptual majesty, the Old Masters have an unattainable greatness, and all we can do is follow in their footsteps’.

The development of the individual as well as the development of society itself has shown a significant increase on its previous level. On the one hand there is scholarship and literature, and on the other improved means of communication that have opened up

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<sup>1</sup> V.V. Vereshchagin ‘O progresse v iskusstve’ in F.I Bulgakov, *V.V. Vereshchagin i ego proizvedeniia* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia A.S.Suvorina, 1905), pp. 133-6. For a more recent publication see V.V. Vereshchagin, *Povesti, ocherki, vospominaniia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1990), pp. 208-11.

new horizons and have set artists new tasks. All of this has brought forth new efforts. But once again the old saying blocked the path: 'The Old Masters did it this way, so we...'

In painting, the excessive reverence and imitation of the Old Masters is manifested to a certain extent in depictions of the nude and in portraits, since both these areas reached their apogee in the work of the Old Masters. But even here we are struck by the monotony of the execution. The effect is always the same: very bright lighting on a very dark, almost black background. This effect is frequently stunning, but it is artificial, unnatural, and unlikelike.

In former times, it is true, artists' studios were small and poorly lit because of the high price of glass for windows. But alongside the studios there were courtyards, gardens and fields that could have served as a beautiful background and could have provided abundant and varied lighting that would have been as effective and would have lightened the black tones and made them less monotonous.

It is well known that the dark tones in old portraits are only partly due to the effects of time; for the most part they were deliberate. When one studies a large number of old portraits, one can only regret the fact that such superb technique in depicting the body, the face, clothing, lace, diamonds, etc. coexists not with the light, airy shadows of a summer's day, such as we all know and can see, but with a dense, artificial darkness. The new school of artists will undoubtedly do art a service when they take people out of dark attics and crypts into the bright light of gardens. There is no doubt that the monotonous old style that required everything to be painted using the same studio lighting served to remove many difficulties and much effort from the artist's shoulders. But in art, even more than in any other field, one must not shrink from facing up to technical difficulties.

Turning to historical painting, we are struck by the significant improvement nowadays in the intellectual and characteristic handling of the subject. Of course, history is still illustrated by more or less entertaining anecdotes, and artists are satisfied to depict what scholarship has established rather than making use of the results of their own researches in their historical paintings; but even now very significant progress has been

made in it when set against the usual flattery and the traditions, legends and protestations of the old school, which do not stand up to criticism.

If artists were to start studying history in a different way, not in chunks from page such-and-such to page such-and-such, if they were to realise that the imitation of a dramatic exaggeration on canvas is now old-fashioned, then they would begin to arouse society's interest in a completely different way, no longer through the anecdotal side of the subject, through picturesque costumes and types that are for the most part quite fantastic. In reality, the way artists have hitherto reworked notable events has been such as to bring a smile to the lips of educated people. But when the radiant 'festive day' of historical painting is replaced by the more convenient 'ordinary days', when an element of truth and simplicity is introduced, then artists will undoubtedly gain.

It would seem unnecessary to mention the unusual progress that can be observed in our time in the sphere of landscape painting. This progress derives from many sources, primarily of course from the development of the natural sciences. It can be said without exaggeration that the landscapes of the Old Masters are childish experiments in comparison with the works of the best modern landscape painters. In truth, it is difficult to imagine how landscape painting could be taken to a higher level of perfection.

In so-called 'religious painting' imitation of the Old Masters is almost as great as it is in portraits. This is fully explicable in terms of the gradual disappearance of religious feeling and, consequently, a preference for the old ideal rather than the creation of a new ideal without the profound beliefs of the past.

Nevertheless, the new school considers it not only possible but even essential to abandon inherited concepts, even if they have become hallowed by time and custom, if those concepts run counter to modern sensibility and artistic notions. Perhaps religious painting will not nowadays reach the level of a second Renaissance, but nevertheless it must be admitted that progress in technical knowledge will be useful even for ecclesiastical painting if, when he is depicting the Deity and the saints in Heaven and on earth, the artist replaces the dull, monotonous, meagre lighting of the studio with the bright, clear, radiant atmosphere of tender, transparent and airy light and shade.

In order to make our ideas comprehensible, let us cite as examples several famous works by Old Masters, such as the well-known paintings by Titian in Venice and Rubens

in Amsterdam of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin.<sup>2</sup> We will say nothing of the great merits of these two paintings, which are universally acknowledged (a claim that is not in the least exaggerated). There can be no doubt that these paintings have darkened down with the passage of time, but it must not be forgotten that they were painted indoors and they make use of the traditional contrast between very strong light and very deep shadow. Nowadays we ask where those black shadows come from. If the Assumption of the Holy Virgin happened to take place in a cave or in some dark place with artificial lighting, then one could understand those shadows; but in that case the bright light would be incomprehensible. But the Assumption took place in the open air, and we assume that God chose a fine, sunny day for such a solemn and magnificent event. So the picture should have been painted even brighter as regards direct and reflected sunlight. Where then, one might well ask, do the black tones come from? The answer is that they exist because neither the light nor the shade were observed; they were thought up, as artists say, ‘in the head’, and therefore they are inauthentic from start to finish. But can one suppose that such great artists as Titian and Rubens were not themselves aware of such errors? Of course, it is as difficult to imagine this as it is to imagine that the great Leonardo da Vinci could have failed to notice the false lighting in his famous painting of the Mona Lisa:<sup>3</sup> he painted his subject sitting outdoors with sharp, metallic tones on her face and with an impossible landscape in the background. Did he really have no idea of the marvellously tender light and semi-tones, shadows and half-shadows that play on the face of a beautiful woman when she is outdoors, nor that in the open air all objects take on a completely different appearance than when they are within four walls?

Let us not be diverted too far in our research; let us simply ask the question: did an artist of that era require such accuracy? No, he did not. But in our era, are such subtleties required of an artist? Yes, they are. It is clear, therefore, that there has been forward progression.

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<sup>2</sup> The paintings depicting the Assumption of the Holy Virgin are those by:

a) Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, Venetian painter, 1488/90-1576). This *Assumption* of 1516-18 is in the Church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice;

b) Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish Baroque painter, 1577-1640. Rubens’s famous *Assumption* of c. 1626 is in Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal (Our Lady’s Cathedral), Antwerp

<sup>3</sup> Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). Italian painter, sculptor, architect and engineer. The painting known as the *Mona Lisa*, or *La Gioconda* dates from 1503-06, and is now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In exactly the same way we might suppose that another inaccuracy in the artistic conception of such masters might well have slipped their attention. For example, in the depiction of the Apostles, whose personalities are made so clear in the Gospels, the body shapes, faces, and poses (especially in Titian's paintings) are not those of poor, simple fishermen, but rather those of handsome and athletic-looking Italian models. It would appear that this error was understood at the time by the artists themselves with their usual tact and common sense, and Rembrandt<sup>4</sup> went so far as to introduce figures from a Dutch marketplace into his religious paintings. But there is still a huge difference between this and the truthful reproduction of national types and costumes which is considered essential today. Is that not progress? Undoubtedly. We would deny that study ever created talent. But on the other hand, we do not doubt for a moment that it acts as a stimulus to talent.

As far as time and place are concerned, the admirers of the old manner of painting extend their imitation so far that they not only paint using the same paints and the same methods as their beloved masters, but they also try to give their pictures that particular hue that time bestows on old canvases. They cover their pictures in dark, shiny paint to give them an aged look, as if these pictures had been painted one, two, or three hundred years ago. This method is even taught in many of the newest schools, and some artists have acquired great reputations as colourists purely because they can make their paintings look like works by Rubens, Van Dyck,<sup>5</sup> Rembrandt, or Velasquez.<sup>6</sup> Let us hope that the new school will work more carefully, not only as regards the conception of the subject, but also in relation to colours, since it is impossible to elaborate a subject properly, with the appropriate amount of varnish, if one is imitating a canvas that has grown yellow or red with age. The young school of artists will take it as axiomatic that one must harmonise each event with its time, place, and lighting, so as to use all the latest scholarly discoveries in relation to costumes and all kinds of psychological and ethnological details.

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<sup>4</sup> Rembrandt (full name Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, 1606-69). Dutch painter, especially noted for his portraits.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641). Flemish painter who worked in England as court painter to King Charles I during the period 1632-41.

<sup>6</sup> Velasquez or Velazquez, Diego Rodriguez de Silva y (1599-1660). Spanish painter.

A scene that takes place in Heaven or on earth simply cannot be painted indoors; it must be painted using natural lighting, morning, noon, evening, or night. A picture's illusion and effect can only gain from this, and the language of painting will become more expressive and comprehensible.

Perhaps with a few changes the same could be said of sculpture, and even of music. Nowadays more than ever before, all the arts are brothers and sisters and have long been united in a single temple of taste, intellect and talent.