

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

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V.V. Vereshchagin

Realism<sup>1</sup>

Realism, realism!<sup>2</sup> How often this word is repeated and yet how rarely, it would appear, is it used with full understanding of its meaning!

‘What do you think realism is?’ I once asked a highly educated lady in Berlin who had frequently discussed realism and realists in art. The lady clearly found it difficult to give an immediate reply and the only thing she could say was, ‘a realist is a person who depicts things in a real fashion’.

I would maintain, however, that depicting things in a real fashion does not in itself give a person the right to be called a realist. In order to make my view clearer I will cite the following example.

At the end of the Anglo-Zulu War<sup>3</sup> not one of the outstanding British artists was prepared to take upon himself the task of depicting this epic that had been played out between whites and blacks. Therefore, the British had to turn to a highly talented French artist.<sup>4</sup> He was given some money and it was explained to him that the uniforms of the British soldiers were such and such, and that the Zulu clothing, or what passed for their clothing, was such and such. Then some eye-witnesses who had been present during the military skirmishes told this artist about the setting of each separate battle, in all likelihood adding to their accounts by showing photographs. Armed with this information, the artist set to work without having the slightest personal knowledge of the country that he had undertaken to portray or of the types and characteristics, the mores

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<sup>1</sup> V.V. Vereshchagin, ‘Realizm’, *Khudozhnik* 1891, No. 1, 20-24.

<sup>2</sup> In this article Vereshchagin uses the term ‘realism’ frequently, both in the general sense and in the more specific sense of the artistic tendency of the late nineteenth century. In Russian, no orthographic distinction is made between these meanings, and we have decided to follow this practice in the translation by rendering the word without an initial capital letter.

<sup>3</sup> The Anglo-Zulu War was fought between January and July 1879.

<sup>4</sup> The reference here is probably to the French painter of battle scenes Alphonse de Neuville (1836-85), who was commissioned by the English Fine Art Society to produce several paintings of battles from the Anglo-Zulu War.

and customs of the Zulu tribe. The artist carried out his task with great boldness, producing several colourful pictures depicting: a mass of people attacking the enemy, who were defending themselves; lots of dead and wounded; much blood; a lot of smoke from gunpowder and the likes. But these paintings show a total lack of the most essential aspect of the subject: you will find in them neither British nor Zulus. Instead of the former we find French soldiers dressed in British uniforms, and instead of Zulus we find ordinary Parisian black models depicted in various more or less martial poses.

Is that really realism? Of course not.

Besides, the majority of artists do not work hard enough on reproducing the real lighting in which the events that they depict took place. Thus, the scenes portrayed in the above-mentioned paintings, battle scenes taking place in the blinding light of the African tropical sun, are painted with the grayish lighting of a European studio. Of course, that means that the sunlight and the various characteristic effects that are dependent on it cannot be successfully conveyed, and the aim of the painting remains unrealized.

So is that realism? Of course not.

I will go further and claim that where all that exists is the simple reproduction of a fact or an event without any idea or any generalization, then you may have certain features of a realistic depiction, but you won't have a trace of realism, that is conscious realism, at the basis of which lie observations and facts, as opposed to idealism, which is based on impressions that have been established *a priori*.

And now I would ask whether anyone can reproach me for lack of an idea, lack of generalization in my works. Hardly!

Can anyone say that I do not take care over the types, costumes, and landscapes that form the framework for the scenes that I portray? Can anyone say that I do not make preparatory studies of the individuals and the setting that form the subject of my paintings? It is unlikely that anyone would say that.

Can anyone say that in my work a scene that really took place in bright sunlight was painted under studio lights, for example, that a scene that took place under a frosty northern sky was reproduced by me within the four walls of a warm, closed little room? It is unlikely that anyone would say that.

As a result, I have the right to consider myself a representative of realism, which demands extreme rigour in the handling of all artistic details and which, far from excluding an idea, incorporates it within itself.

The fact that I am not alone in holding this opinion of my work is demonstrated by the following lines written by the correspondent of the American *Sunday Express* newspaper and sent by him from Paris during the latest exhibition of my work in that city:

‘The respect shown in the paintings to certain ideals, to the ideals of an artist to whom the conventional rules observed by Parisian artists are so alien, as they are to Vereshchagin, is a welcome sign of the renunciation of the crude realism that has begun to creep into French art. Dargenty, the critic of *Courrier de l’art*, does not consider Vereshchagin a “captivating” artist, but he admits that he has knowledge and talent, adding that, for his part, he prefers a carefully worked out idea to the “crude expression of vulgar realism”. He hopes that a reaction is close at hand, and thinks that the crowds “rushing” to Vereshchagin’s exhibition are the “precursors” of the coming victory of the idea.’

Even more remarkable is the reaction of the London newspaper *Christian* in its issue of 2 December 1887. I find this view especially interesting because of the particular tendency of the newspaper in question:

‘These paintings are the work of Vereshchagin, who is the equal of any modern artist in technical mastery and who is superior to any artist who has ever lived in terms of the majesty of his moral aims and the accessibility of his teachings to all who make some effort to understand him.

I simply want to say that anyone who misses the chance to see these paintings will miss the best opportunity to understand the age in which he lives. If the nineteenth century ever had a prophet, then that prophet is the Russian artist Vereshchagin.’

I repeat: I quote these last lines largely because of their distinctiveness as opinion expressed by a special clerical publication, an opinion that is all the more significant in view of the attacks that have been made on me by people attempting to prove that they are more Catholic than the Pope.

Realism is not the enemy of anything that is dear to modern man. It does not depart from common sense, or from science, or from religion! How is it possible to feel anything other than the deepest reverence for the teachings of Christ regarding the Father and Creator of all that exists, and for the wonderful dominance of Christian love?

True, we are the enemies of sanctimoniousness, of all ostentatious, feigned piety. But can we really be criticized for this when Christ himself said: 'But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking' (Matthew. 6.7).

It goes without saying that we give an entirely different value to things that were explained differently centuries ago. The childhood of science and, therefore, of our idea of the universe may interest us now, but it plays no part in directing us. On the threshold of the twentieth century we cannot accept the notion that the heavens are filled with saints and angels, or that in the bowels of the earth there dwell devils who are responsible for roasting the sinners of the world. We also refuse to accept in its literal meaning the ancient idea of reward for good deeds and torture over a slow-burning fire for wicked deeds.

In our capacity as artists we do not reject the ideals of previous centuries and of the Old Masters. On the contrary, we reserve an honourable place in the history of art for them. But we refuse to imitate them for the simple reason that things are right in their own time and the realism of one century has within it the beginnings of the next century's idealism.

Is it not the case that those truly great artists who are now regarded as great idealists were great realists in their own time?

Who would dare suggest that Raphael<sup>5</sup> was not a realist in his own century? Or that his works did not scandalize many of his contemporaries whose tastes were formed by the work of earlier artists?

And what about Rubens<sup>6</sup>, who overstepped all the bounds of contemporary decency not only as an artist, but also as a thinker? I hope no one would doubt the fact that his powerful if one-sided genius interwove personality types from Christianity with

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<sup>5</sup> Raphael (Raffaello Santi, 1483-1520). Italian painter and architect.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish Baroque painter, 1577-1640.

types from pagan mythology; that his God the Father is the same as his Olympian Jupiter; that they are both portraits of one and the same red-cheeked model; that his Mother of God and his Hebe<sup>7</sup> (one might even say his Venus) are characters of the same type: they are all equally rosy-cheeked. Equally beautiful, equally self-satisfied!

Who would deny that Rubens, having populated the Christian Heaven with fleshy, strapping and *extremely* immodest lads and lasses, turned all tradition upside down and thereby emerged as a powerful and talented realist in his age? There is no doubt that he astonished and scandalized the mass of his devout contemporaries.

And what about Rembrandt?<sup>8</sup> Or the other artists who are now regarded more or less as idealists? Is it not the case that they were all, in their own time, representatives of a realism that from our perspective has been significantly eroded by the hand of time and the progressive development of our consciousness?

Who in our age could reproach those artists for all that boldness which undoubtedly dumbfounded their contemporaries? And yet, how many arguments there have been about those artists, how many lances have been broken on account of them! As we look back, all of that seems strange. But surely it is a sign of what the future holds for the remarkable works of our era. These works were also badly received, they were declared to be too daring, too bold, too realistic; surely they, in their turn, will gain in strength from progressive developments in ideas and techniques? Surely the day will come when they take their place in the archives of the old ideals?

But we have to deal with our irritable and demanding contemporaries. Deviation from the formulas that have been recognized over centuries by successive generations is generally regarded as unforgivable impertinence, and as a thoroughly shameful act. Novelists, painters, sculptors, and composers have to compromise with vulgarity and absurdity, which inevitably slows down the development of artistic ideas and techniques.

Even those individuals who grudgingly admit that we are also ‘people of ideas’, that we are also ‘people with a good grounding in technique’ — even those individuals express regret that we have betrayed the traditions of the great artists of the past, that we

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<sup>7</sup> Greek goddess of youth, the daughter of Zeus and Hera.

<sup>8</sup> Rembrandt (full name Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, 1606-69). Dutch painter, especially noted for his portraits.

have not been prepared to follow the doctrines that have been hallowed by a series of great names.

Yes, it is true: we are different from them in many respects. We think differently, we are bolder in our generalizations about the facts of the past, present, and future. We even work differently, transferring our impressions to canvas in a different fashion.

Can we nowadays take literally the widely held concept of a God who took upon Himself the image of man and who now sits on the right hand of the Omnipotent Father, surrounded by all the hosts of angels and saints? Can we accept as fact the ideal representation of all those thrones that exceed in luxury the notorious thrones of the great Indian Moguls? Can we nowadays accept the existence in the clouds of all those magnificent garments adorned with pearls and precious stones? Can we in all sincerity and ingenuousness represent in our imaginations those saints who, so we are told, sit on those same clouds as if on chairs or sofas, and who are adorned in the same rich manner – saints who therefore luxuriate in surroundings that they found hateful when they were on earth?

All those magnificent clothes, all that gold and glittering surroundings that are regarded as a reward in eternity for a virtuous life on earth — does this not seem completely childish to us, so that we would say it was incompatible with good taste?

Much has been written about my works and there has been much criticism of those paintings with subjects drawn from the spheres of religion and war. And yet I painted all those pictures with no ulterior motive; I painted them simply because the subjects interested me. In each case, any moral lesson appeared later, as an expression of the truthfulness of the impressions.

For example, I once saw Emperor Alexander II sitting for five whole days on a little hillock with a spyglass in his hand, and the battlefield spread out before him, watching the shelling and storming of the enemy positions.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that the old German Emperor attended battles in exactly the same way, as - in his turn - did his

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<sup>9</sup> Vereshchagin is here referring to an incident that he observed during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 and that forms the subject of his painting *Alexander II at Plevna on August 30 1877* (1878-79, Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow). A Russian attack on Turkish positions at Plevna was timed to coincide with the Tsar's name-day, but the resulting losses were high because of inadequate preparation.

son, that remarkable man, the late Kaiser Friedrich.<sup>10</sup> This was confirmed to me by the accounts of eye-witnesses. Of course, it would be absurd to imagine that, just because an Emperor is present during a battle, he is going to gallop round his troops brandishing his sabre like some young ensign. And yet it was said that in my picture I wanted to undermine the prestige of the Sovereign in the eyes of the masses, who were inclined to imagine their Emperor parading on a fiery steed at a moment of danger when the battle was at its height.

I depicted the wounded being bandaged and transferred exactly as I myself saw it, and as I experienced it when I had a wound bandaged and was then carried in the most primitive manner.<sup>11</sup> And still I was accused of exaggeration and slander.

Over the course of several days I saw with my own eyes prisoners slowly freezing and dying as they marched in a column that stretched for more than thirty miles.<sup>12</sup> I showed my painting of this scene to the American artist Frank D. Millet<sup>13</sup>, who had been present, and when he saw it he acknowledged that it was remarkably faithful to reality. However, on account of this painting I was showered with abuse which could never be repeated in print.

I saw a priest administering the last rites on the battlefield over a heap of dead soldiers whose bodies had been maimed and ripped to pieces and who had given their lives in defence of their country. And once again this scene, which I painted literally with tears in my eyes, was declared in the highest circles to be a product of my imagination, an obvious lie.<sup>14</sup>

My highly placed accusers did not deign to pay the least attention to the fact that *they* were caught out in a lie by that same priest, who, angered by the accusations levied against me, declared loudly in the presence of members of the public standing looking at the painting that he was the person who had administered the rites over the piles of dead

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<sup>10</sup> The 'old German Kaiser' is Wilhelm I (1797-1888, Kaiser 1871-1888). He was succeeded by his son, Kaiser Friedrich I (1831-88), who died only 99 days after coming to the throne.

<sup>11</sup> The incident described here is the subject of Vereshchagin's painting *After the Attack. A Dressing Station in Plevna* (1881, Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow).

<sup>12</sup> This incident is the subject of Vereshchagin's painting *The Road of the Prisoners of War (The Road to Plevna)* (1878-79, Brooklyn Museum, New York).

<sup>13</sup> Francis Davis Millet (1846-1912). American writer and painter. Served as a journalist during the Russo-Turkish War and was decorated by Russia and Romania. Died on the *Titanic* in 1912.

<sup>14</sup> The painting referred to here is *The Defeated. Funeral Service* (1877-79, Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow).

soldiers, and that the scene had been exactly as depicted in my painting. However, in spite of all this, my painting was only saved by the fact that it was excluded from the exhibition, and when later it was suggested that all the paintings should be published in tinted engravings, the consistory judges banned the project, since these cheap pictures might easily reach the mass of the people.

Do not imagine, though, that such indignation existed only in Russian higher circles. One very famous Prussian general advised Emperor Alexander II to order the burning of all my war pictures, since they were extremely pernicious.<sup>15</sup>

My paintings of religious subjects provoked even more hostile comment. But did I really deal disrespectfully with Christian moral doctrines? No, I hold such doctrines in the highest esteem. Do I attack either the idea of Christianity or its Founder? No, I have the greatest respect for them. Did I try to minimize the significance of the cross? No, that would be a complete impossibility.

I travelled through the entire Holy Land with the Gospels in my hand.<sup>16</sup> I visited the places that were hallowed many centuries ago by the presence there of our Saviour. As a result, as might be expected, I developed my own ideas about how to portray many of the events and facts mentioned in the Gospel. My ideas have to be distinguished from the notions of artists who have never seen the decorative side of the Holy Land, who have never personally observed its people and their customs.

For example, take my conception of the Adoration of the Magi. I have planned this picture, but I have not yet painted it.<sup>17</sup>

A clear, starry night. Some travellers are drawing close to Bethlehem. They are the Magi, people with a good knowledge of science and well versed in astrology. As they go along the road into the town, the wise men observe a star above them which they have never seen before. In those days it was believed that each person had his own star and, conversely, that each star corresponded to a person on earth, and so the Magi naturally

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<sup>15</sup> The reference here may be to Field Marshal Helmuth (Carl Bernhard) Graf von Moltke, Chief of Staff of the Prussian army. Having visited Vereshchagin's exhibition in Berlin in 1882 (where he was conducted round by the artist), von Moltke forbade organized visits to the exhibition by German military personnel.

<sup>16</sup> Vereshchagin visited Palestine in 1884 and produced a series of paintings on biblical subjects. The exhibition of his paintings of scenes from the life of Jesus in Vienna in 1885 was highly controversial and involved Vereshchagin in a bitter row with Cardinal Ganglbauer, with whom he exchanged angry articles in the press. Several of the paintings in the exhibition were vandalized by a Catholic monk.

<sup>17</sup> We have not been able to establish whether the planned painting of the Magi was ever realized.

came to the conclusion that this new star was an indication of the birth of a baby somewhere nearby and that, since the star was exceptionally bright, the newborn baby must one day become an outstanding person.

When they reached Bethlehem the Magi went to an inn for the night. Soon afterwards the stableman who was looking after the travellers' mules came and told them that a poor woman was taking shelter among the animals and that she had given birth to an exceptionally beautiful child. On hearing this, the Magi exchanged meaningful glances: they had correctly interpreted the appearance of the hitherto unseen star.

'Let us go and have a look: it must be an unusual Baby', they said, and they went into the cave adjoining the inn, where there were horses, cows and donkeys. And behind them came other travellers who were curious to see the newborn Baby.

In a corner of the cave they could see a beautiful, pale young Woman sitting on a pile of straw, feeding her Baby. Meanwhile her husband, an elderly man, could be seen some way off at the side of the cave, preparing something for his family.

'What a beautiful child', cried the Magi and, turning to the Holy Virgin they said, 'Remember our words. He will be a great man. We have seen his star.'

Then, touched with compassion for the poverty of the surroundings, one of the Magi gave the Baby a gold coin, another, perhaps, poured some precious myrrh out of his flask. Before leaving the cave, the Magi again turned to Mary and repeated their prophesy about the great future awaiting the Baby, and 'Mary kept these words in her heart.'

I am fully convinced that such a realistic depiction of the poverty and simplicity of the scene at Christ's birth is incomparably greater than the idealization of wealth and other exaggerations employed by artists in the past. But this approach to the subject is new, and therefore it seems strange and, in all likelihood, it will provoke gossip. And only in a hundred or two hundred years will our descendants be able to resolve the issue of which of these two views should be considered correct.

Among the pictures at the exhibition, note should be made of one depicting a common occurrence in Palestine in ancient times, a highly dramatic event, yet one that

retains its essential simplicity. I am speaking of crucifixion during the period of Roman rule.<sup>18</sup>

The sky is covered with dense black clouds. The scene is just outside the city wall of Jerusalem. On a small rock three crosses are put up, all the same size and shape. The figures of the crucified men at either side are ordinary and are composed roughly, whereas the central figure has a more elegant form. His face cannot be seen. It is hidden by the long brown hair hanging over it. The long hair indicates that the man being crucified is submitting voluntarily to God. The wounds on the hands and feet of the three crucified men are oozing blood (it is well known that doctors admit it is difficult to stem the flow of blood from outstretched hands and feet). Opposite the crosses there are two high-ranking priests who are clearly arguing about something with a Roman soldier in armour. Perhaps they are talking about the criminal nature of the Man hanging on the central cross. The Roman seems to have doubts about this. Around the rock there are soldiers forming a human chain to hold back the crowd.

In the foreground can be seen various types of people, some on foot, others astride horses, camels, and donkeys. These are some villagers or nomads on their way back from market who have stopped for a moment to look at the day's main event, the execution of the Man whose deeds they had heard about, even in their huts and tents, the execution of the Man whose arrest had almost provoked a rebellion in the city. In the crowd can be seen several European merchants in their characteristic hats (which disappeared from use only relatively recently), and some Pharisees wearing headgear on which legal dictums are inscribed. One of the Pharisees is arguing with the man next to him about a woman in a corner of the painting who is crying bitterly, probably the mother of one of the men being crucified. Her face is not visible, but her grief must be great — it is obvious that none of the women around her has managed to console her. She probably tried several times to turn her son away from his chosen path, but in vain, and now his hour has come.

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<sup>18</sup> Vereshchagin is here describing *Roman Execution (Crucifixion)* (Brooklyn Museum, New York), produced as a result of his trip to Palestine in 1884. The painting is one of a trilogy of works jointly entitled *Trilogy of Executions*.

Next to this heartbroken mother stands a beautiful young woman in the depths of despair at the sight of the executed Man; tears stream down her cheeks, but she is unaware of them, so strong is her terrible, inexpressible grief.

As soon as the authorities leave and the crowd disperses, the mother and the people with her will be able to approach the crosses and say their last farewell.

Further on we have a depiction of a modern execution in a different nation and a different setting.<sup>19</sup> We see a cold, northern, winter's day. A crowd of people has gathered on one of the squares in St Petersburg, trying to get as close as they can to the gallows. They are being held back by mounted policemen. The only people allowed near the gallows are the select few, mostly military men, representatives of the gilded youth of the capital who are hoping to get a bit of the hangman's rope: there is a widespread superstition that a piece of the rope used to hang someone brings its lucky owner good fortune in a game of cards.

The criminal, wrapped in a white shroud, with a hood over his head, has just been hanged and is still twirling at the end of the rope. The crowd stands in speechless shock at the horror of the edifying spectacle. Just one rough voice rings out from the crowd: 'It serves him right.' But these words are instantly drowned out by several women's voices: 'How can you say that? It's not for us to judge. Almighty God will do that!'

Meanwhile the snow keeps on falling, smoke rises into the sky from the factories, work goes on as normal.

It is interesting that this last painting, which did not go down well with the Russian public, proved popular with the British. On the other hand, *Cannon-Fire in India*<sup>20</sup> was not at all to the taste of the British, whereas the Russians were full of praise for it. People who served a long time in India have told me that I was wrong in considering this depiction of an execution to be a typical means of carrying out a death sentence in that country. They claimed that this type of execution was used only during the last Sepoy Rebellion, and even then only in very rare cases. But I maintain that not

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<sup>19</sup> *Execution of Conspirators in Russia* (1884-85, Museum of Political History, St Petersburg). Part of the *Trilogy of Executions*.

<sup>20</sup> The third painting in the *Trilogy of Executions*. It is generally known as *English Suppression of the Indian Mutiny* (1884, location unknown). A painting entitled *Cannon* (1882, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.) seems to be a preparatory sketch for this work, since it depicts a British Army officer standing by a cannon in the same pose as the figure on the right of the finished painting.

only was this form of execution (which is, incidentally, comparatively humane) used widely during the above mentioned rebellion, when sepoy were strapped to the barrels of cannons in their thousands, but it was also used by the British authorities in India for many years both before and after the Sepoy Rebellion in 1858. Moreover, I know for a fact that this particular form of execution will be used again in the future. Hindus are not afraid of any other form of execution at the hands of the 'cruel, evil Europeans'. Hindus are convinced that each of their tribesmen who is killed or hanged by Europeans goes to swell the ranks of the martyrs, for whom a great reward is being prepared in the afterlife. But execution by being strapped to the barrel of a cannon strikes terror in the heart of the native, since the execution blows the body of the criminal into many bits, and he is not, therefore, able to enter Heaven in a decent form. This terror tactic was used by the British government and will continue to be used by it for as long as it is afraid of losing its Indian possessions.

In order to keep a population of 250,000,000 under political and economic control using no more than 60,000 bayonets, it is not enough to be brave or to use political tact. It is impossible to avoid executions and bloody reprisals.

All of this is so obvious that it seems really surprising that people are inclined to take offence when we artists, obliged as we are to observe and identify the truth, use our powers to convey our impressions on canvas or paper.

On all sides artists are beset with demands to give the public something new, something original, but when we actually try to present something like that we are accused of sheer impertinence.

What is the result of this state of affairs?

People are tired of books, and they eagerly pounce on the crude facts from real life that are carried in the daily newspapers. People are bored by art galleries and exhibitions, since what they will see there will probably be the same type of painting on the same subjects and all done in the same clichéd manner. People are tired of going to theatres where nine out of ten plays have the same conventional plot that invariably ends with a wedding.

So, generally speaking, what is the role of art at the present time?

Art has been brought down to the level of entertainment for those able and willing to amuse themselves with it. It is designed to aid the public's digestion. For example, painting is considered to be part of the furniture. If there happens to be an empty space on a wall in the gap between a door and a corner, where there is a sideboard with a vase on it, then that empty space has to be filled immediately with a pleasantly executed and undemanding painting, one with a subject that will not distract attention too much from the other details of furnishing and knick-knacks, and that will not disturb the *far niente* of visitors.

And yet the resources and influence of art are enormous. Most of the artists of the past owe their fame to the fact that they were faithful servants of the rich and of the authorities. Included in their number were people who were not motivated by any serious feeling of civic responsibility, and yet what a powerful influence they have had on art through the centuries! This influence was felt in every nook and cranny and every secret twist in the lives of nations.

What can we expect of art in our day and age when artists are inspired by their duty as citizens of their country, when they have stopped kowtowing to the rich and powerful who like to be called patrons of the arts, when artists have gained independence and have begun to realize that the first condition for creative activity is to become 'noble', not in the narrow caste sense, but in a wider sense of the word in relation to the age we live in.

Armed with the trust of the public, art will become much more closely connected to society; it will become its ally in the face of the serious danger threatening modern society, which we all more or less tend to love and respect.

One cannot deny the fact that all other questions of our age pale in comparison to the question of socialism, which is approaching us like a fast-moving thundercloud.

For centuries the masses have dragged out their lives on the brink of starvation, hoping for a better future, and now they do not want to wait any longer. Their former hopes for the future have been destroyed. Their appetites have been aroused, and they are loudly demanding what is owing to them in arrears, that is, they are demanding that all wealth should be shared out; and in order to make this share-out more durable, they are demanding that things be compared on the same level, that talents and abilities be

compared by the same criteria and, moreover, that all workers who have contributed to the achievement of wealth and comfort should receive exactly the same wages. They are seeking to re-build society on new foundations, and if they meet any opposition to their aims then they threaten to burn all the monuments pertaining to that order that - in their view - has already outlived its usefulness. They are threatening to blow up public buildings, churches, art galleries, libraries, and museums, and they preach a real religion of despair.

## II

My friend, the late General Skobelev<sup>21</sup>, once asked me, ‘How do you interpret the impulse behind socialists and anarchists?’ He admitted that he himself could not comprehend their aims. ‘What is it that they want? What are they trying to achieve?’

‘First of all’, I replied, ‘these people are opposed to international wars. Second, they set very little store by art, including painting. So if they ever get their hands on power, then you with your strategic considerations and I with my paintings will both be immediately consigned to the archives. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, I understand’, replied Skobelev, ‘and from now on I intend to fight them.’

As I said earlier, I am not mistaken when I claim that society will be seriously threatened in the near future by a huge mass of people who for generations, for centuries have lived on the edge of starvation, dressed like beggars, living in squalid, unhealthy areas, poor people with no house, no home, or else complete down-and-outs. All right then, but who is to blame for their poverty if not they themselves?

No, it would be unfair to heap the blame onto their shoulders. It would be much closer to the truth to say that society as a whole is more to blame for their position than they are themselves.

But is there any way out of this situation?

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<sup>21</sup> General Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev (1843-82). A member of a famous military dynasty. He took part in the Russo-Turkish War, and was one of the Russian commanders at the Battle of Plevna. Vereshchagin first met and befriended M.D. Skobelev in Turkestan. The General is depicted in Vereshchagin’s painting *Shipka-Sheinova (Skobelev at Shipka)* (1883-88, Russian Museum, St Petersburg). It should be noted, however, that Vereshchagin also knew Mikhail Dmitrievich’s father, General Dmitrii Ivanovich Skobelev (1821-80), and it is conceivable (though less likely in view of the phrase ‘my friend’) that he is here referring to the father rather than the son.

Of course there is. Christ our Teacher pointed out that the rich and powerful of the world could help matters without provoking a revolution, without causing an upset in the existing social order, if they would only concern themselves seriously with the unfortunate ones. That would undoubtedly involve allowing the masses to enjoy their wealth without a rebellion. But at present there is little hope of a peaceful settlement of the issue. Of course, the prosperous classes would prefer to remain Christian in name only. They will all be hoping that palliative measures are sufficient to improve the situation. Or else, thinking that the danger is still some way off, they will not want to make any great concessions. And the beggars and the poor, who were formerly ready to reach an agreement, will soon no longer be prepared to accept charitable handouts.

What do they want?

Neither more nor less than the levelling of wealth in the society of the future. They demand the material and moral levelling of all rights, all activities, all talents and capabilities. As we have already said, they seek to destroy all the bases of the existing social order, and in the newly hallowed order of things they seek to open up a completely new era of liberty, equality and fraternity in place of the mere shadows of these great concepts that exist today.

I have no intention of entering into a discussion of this subject. I have no wish to prove the extent to which these claims are justifiable or unjustifiable, rational or absurd. I am simply stating the fact that there exists a deep chasm between the former cries for bread and today's sharply formulated demands.

It is clear that the appetite of the masses has increased compared with previous centuries, and the bill which they intend to present for payment will be not inconsiderable.

Who will be asked to pay that bill?

Probably the whole of society.

Will payment be made voluntarily?

Obviously not.

Consequently, there will be complications, quarrels, civil wars.

Naturally, there will be serious complications. They are already casting a shadow in the form of disturbances of a socialist nature here one minute, there the next. In

America it is highly likely that such disturbances are not as great or are less noticeable, but in Europe, in France and Belgium for example, these disturbances are taking a threatening form.

Who will be victorious in this struggle?

If Napoleon was not wrong when he claimed that victory always goes to the 'big battalions', then the 'levellers' will win. There are very large numbers of them. Whoever knows human nature will understand that those who do not wish to lose a lot will, at the decisive moment, join forces with those who have nothing to lose.

It is generally believed that the threat is not yet inevitable. But so far as I have been able to judge, the threat is not equally imminent in all states. France, for example, that long-suffering country that is forever experimenting on itself, whether in social or scientific matters, is the closest of all to a fateful uprising. Then comes Belgium, then other states.

It is highly likely that the present generation will witness something serious in this regard. As for future generations, there is no doubt that they will see the complete reconstruction of the social order in all states.

The aims of the socialists, especially the anarchists, and the disturbances provoked by them are everywhere having a sensational effect on society. But no sooner will these disturbances die down than society will once again fall into its habitual apathy, and no one will even think that the fact that such symptoms are repeated with such frequency and regularity is in itself a sign of the unhealthy condition of society.

Farsighted people are beginning to understand that palliative measures will lead nowhere; that a change of government and governors will not be of the slightest use, and one can only wait for chance shifts in the behaviour of the warring parties, in the energetic determination on the part of the prosperous classes not to make any concessions, and the energetic determination on the part of the proletariat to go forward to their planned goal with courage and persistence.

The rich can console themselves only with the fact that the 'levellers' have not yet had time to organize their forces for a successful struggle with society. To some extent that is true. But although things are moving slowly, the 'levellers' are constantly

improving their organization. On the other hand, can we say that society is so well organized that it need have no fear of attack?

Who are the recognized and official defenders of society?

The army and the church.

Let us suppose that the day comes when clerics finally lose their influence on the people and when soldiers lower their gun barrels, where then will society find its bulwark? Does it have a more reliable defence?

Of course it does. Its defence is nothing other than *talent* and its representatives in science, literature, art and all other areas.

Art must and will defend society. Little attention is paid to its influence and it is not sharply felt, but it is very great. One might even say that its influence on the minds, hearts, and actions of nations is immense, irresistible, without equal. Art must and will defend society with all the more care and all the more zeal because its servants know that the 'levellers' are not inclined to accord them the honoured and worthy position that they currently hold, since - in the opinion of the levellers - a good pair of boots is more useful than a good picture or statue, or a good novel. These people declare openly that talent is a luxury, that talent is an aristocratic privilege, and that therefore talent must be cast down from its pedestal, down to the common level, a principle to which we will never submit.

Let us not deceive ourselves. New talents will appear which will gradually 'adapt' to the new conditions, if such conditions gain the upper hand; and perhaps their works will be all the better for this. But we will never concede the principle of total destruction and reconstruction unless this principle is based on some foundation other than the well-known premise: 'We will destroy everything and clear the ground, and as for reconstruction, ...we'll see about that later'. We will stand up for and defend improvements to the existing order of things by peaceful and gradual means.

It goes without saying that we demand that, for its part, society should help us in the fulfillment of our task, that it should trust us, that it should give us all the freedom we need for the development and promotion of talent.

But therein lies the difficulty!

An overfed, self-satisfied society falls into despondency at any change, at any word of reprimand, any joke, even any criticism. It loses faith in the leading, bold representatives of science, literature and art. Society jealously guards its right not only to indicate the path for talent, but even to regulate the extent of its development and promotion.

In a society such as ours everything mediocre and conventional is protected by all sorts of rights and privileges, whereas everything that is new and original inevitably arouses hostility and criticism, and faces a difficult struggle under pressure from widespread sanctimoniousness and hypocrisy.

Try to create something unusual or clever in the field of science or literature, or try to present the most strikingly original conception in graphic or plastic form: if you fail to surround it with the vulgarity and mediocrity that are so dear to the heart of society then you will be torn to shreds for it, people will not even hear you out, you will be called a charlatan and perhaps another, worse word.

Why is it so? Did society really show the way for all great discoveries? No, it constantly held them back, it constantly impeded them.

Was society in its collective form ever responsible for any of the great works of art or literature? No, society constantly tormented and persecuted talented people, although after their deaths it was society that raised monuments to them.

How could society evince such conceit and arrogance? It was led onto this path solely by the unchristian belief that 'the end justifies the means'.

Could there be anything more unbearable than those conversations that we sometimes hear?:

'Have you been to the Salon?'

'No, we haven't had a chance to go this year, but we went several times last year.'

There is both irony and truth in these words, since in most cases what you will see in the Salon is the same number of pictures of about the same quality, with roughly the same subjects and, finally, painted in the same style.

'Have you seen the new play by Sardou?'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Victorien Sardou (1831-1908). Popular French dramatist. Author of more than fifty plays.

‘Imagine, I don’t think I’m going to manage to see it. I’m dashing off to the country. But tomorrow we are going to the Comédie Française to see Dumas’s new play<sup>23</sup>. They say the two are very similar in ideas and plot.’

And that is absolutely true. They are, without doubt, more or less identical.

Whose fault is that if not the authors’ themselves?

No. Ask dramatists if they would dare to present an action in the form in which it inspired them through its real occurrence, with its logical conclusion following ineluctably from the course of events — ask them if they would dare do this and this time reject the banal, conventional dénouement that has become fixed over the years.

‘No’, they will say to you, ‘that would be unthinkable’. And they would be right. Society, oppressed by the burden of sanctimoniousness, will not go to see a play like that, however interesting it might be! So the author has to satisfy the tastes of the public if he does not want to bring ruin on himself and his director.

The same thing applies to artists, sculptors, and even composers. A huge number of those beloved by the muses have been driven to an early grave by the hostility of the public to any new interpretation of poetic and musical ideas!

On the one hand, complaints fly around about the predominance in art of boring monotony and even vulgarity. People demand something inspired, something original. On the other hand, that same public will despotically execute you for anything that goes beyond accepted, conventional ideas.

I believe it is high time that we came to realize that art has to be approached with tolerance and trust if we want it to ‘bond’ with society, if we want it to unite with society so as to serve it through truth and faith, especially in these difficult times when poets and artists are soldiers at their posts.

‘But listen, Mr Representative of Art’, people might say to me, ‘what is the news that you are so anxious to announce to us, what discoveries have you made that are so new to society?’

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<sup>23</sup> Alexandre Dumas (Fils) (1824-95). Dumas the Younger was one of the leading French dramatists of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Fair enough, perhaps what we have to say is not new, but there is no doubt that the idea of it has not yet penetrated to people's consciousness. Armed with the rich and varied resources of art, we will tell the people some truths.

'Stop', we will say to them, 'Stop wallowing in illusions of idealism that lull your reason to sleep, the idealism of elevated words and phrases. Take a look around you with the eyes of conscious realism and you will see where you went wrong. You are not the Christians that you would want to be known as. You are not the representatives of Christian societies, Christian states.

People who go out and kill human beings just like themselves are not Christian.

What have you done with the Saviour's commandment about Christian humility and about giving succour to those who are in real need?

Allow me to ask about the present condition of those two great administrations of the Church of Christ that call themselves the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church and that are divided because they cannot agree amongst themselves whether the Holy Spirit comes from the Father and the Son, or just the Father alone. How can it be that they have still not reached agreement and that, blinded by mutual hatred, they are neglecting their great earthly mission?

What position has been taken by these comparatively new churches on the question of defending a more realistic understanding of the link between life and its Creator? Is it possible that after their struggle with their great opponent these churches have also fallen into a sweet sleep as regards the existing order of things and have also refused to turn their hand to further reform?

But if this is so, then talented people must shake up the deep and powerful lethargy into which the churches have sunk. This is a difficult but noble task. And if they refuse to listen to us, if they try to stop up our mouths, well so much the worse will it be for society. Society itself will awaken from its sleep, but it will be too late: once more 'the vandals will burn Rome'. We can be certain that when that happens there will be no mercy for churches or for bankers' offices.

'Who has ears to hear, let him hear.'