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# Vasilij V. Vereshchagin's Canvases of Central Asian Conquest

David SCHIMMELPENNINCK VAN DER OYE

## Abstract

This paper analyzes the art and writings of the nineteenth century Russian painter Vasilij Vereshchagin. Focusing on his Turkestan series of 1869-1873, it examines the artist's views about the tsarist conquest of Central Asia. The paper also discusses the place of Vereshchagin in the context of his contemporaries, the aesthetic views of N. G. Chernyshevskij and Edward Said's ideas about Orientalism. An examination of his canvases and writings about the region suggests that the painter saw the Russian conquest as a positive development, but was critical of the way it was carried out.

**Keywords:** V. V. Vereshchagin, Central Asia, Orientalism in Art, Realism in Art, Russian painting.

## Résumé

Cet article analyse l'art et les écrits du peintre russe du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle Vasilij Vereshchagin. Se concentrant sur sa série turkestanaise de 1869-1873, il examine les perceptions par l'artiste de la conquête tsariste de l'Asie centrale. L'article discute également de la place de Vereshchagin parmi ses contemporains, des idées esthétiques de N. G. Chernyshevskij et des idées d'Edward Saïd à propos de l'orientalisme. Une analyse des toiles et écrits de Vereshchagin au sujet de la région suggère que le peintre aurait vu la conquête russe comme un développement positif, tout en critiquant la manière dont elle a été réalisée.

**Mots-clefs :** V. V. Vereshchagin. Asie centrale, orientalisme dans l'art, réalisme dans l'art, peinture russe.

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On 30 Floréal, year VI, or May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1798 according to the French revolutionary calendar, a distinguished group of 167 scientists, engineers, scholars and artists sailed from the Mediterranean port of Toulon. These learned men were joining a flotilla under the ambitious Corsican general, Napoleon Bonaparte, whose aim was to wrest Egypt from Ottoman control. While primarily motivated by the Directoire's desire to cut Britain's links with India, Napoleon also had more intellectual aims. Along with dealing a severe blow to the colonial prosperity of France's hated maritime rival, possession of the lower Nile would enable him systematically to study, catalogue and describe a great ancient civilisation, in the best tradition of the Enlightenment's *encyclopédistes*.<sup>1</sup>

At first, Napoleon seemed set to repeat the brilliant success of his Italian campaign the previous year. Within three weeks of landing at Alexandria, his troops routed Mamluk forces at the Battle of the Pyramids and were soon in possession of Cairo. But the Corsican's glory was short-lived. No more than ten days after he had vanquished Egypt's defenders on land, the English Admiral Horatio Nelson sank his fleet in Aboukir Bay, cutting the French expeditionary army off from the homeland and ultimately dooming the operation.

Nevertheless, the setback did not deter Napoleon's cultural efforts. Before its inevitable return three years later, his corps of savants carried out an unprecedented inventory of Egyptian antiquities, whose crowning achievement was the twenty-volume *Description de l'Égypte*. According to Edward Said, the invasion was a defining moment in modern scholarship of the East, "the first in a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist's specialized expertise was put to functional colonial use."<sup>2</sup> The ill-fated Egyptian expedition also left an important artistic legacy, as over the next decade painters produced over 70 canvases glorifying the future emperor's military exploits.<sup>3</sup> And when French generals began their conquest of Algeria in the 1830s, many artists joined them in the Napoleonic fashion, thereby helping to launch a vogue in Europe's salons for Near Eastern themes.<sup>4</sup>

Napoleon influenced nineteenth-century colonialists elsewhere too. Upon his appointment in 1867 as the first Governor-General of Russia's new province of Turkestan, Major-General Konstantin von Kaufman faithfully followed the Egyptian example by recruiting civilian scientists, scholars, and a

<sup>1</sup> Symcox, 2003, pp. 13-14; Laurens, 2004, pp. 49-54; Bourguet, 1999, pp. 21-36.

<sup>2</sup> Said, 1978, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Porterfield, 1998, pp. 43-79; Lemaire, 2001, pp. 105-109.

<sup>4</sup> Alazard, 1930, pp. 35-36; Julian, 1977, pp. 122-125.

painter to serve under him. Like Napoleon, he strove to inventory the newly conquered territory and communicate the findings to his compatriots, not to mention boosting his own reputation in the bargain.<sup>5</sup> While there were some significant contributions to geography, orientology and other fields, Kaufman's efforts in this regard had a less spectacular impact. However, the general's decision to hire a young painter, Vasilij Vasil'evich Vereshchagin, for his new posting was to prove rather more fateful.

During his lifetime, no Russian artist was as well known both in his homeland and abroad as Vasilij Vereshchagin. A painter who focused on the Orient and on war, with a special talent for highly realistic and disturbing scenes of vividly coloured exotic savagery, he found a ready audience among a public eager for such thrilling diversions from the drab existence of urban life. Vereshchagin's exhibits in St. Petersburg were mobbed; over 200,000 people attended his show in 1880, and Emperor Alexander II arranged for the canvases to be displayed in the Winter Palace for a private viewing.<sup>6</sup> The same collection, which featured the recent Turkish War of 1877-1878, also attracted large crowds when it made the rounds of Europe's capitals the following year. The art historian Vladimir Stasov calculated the number of visitors to the Berlin show at 145,000, while 110,000 people saw it in Vienna, 57,000 in Budapest and 42,000 in Hamburg.<sup>7</sup> A year-long exhibition in 1881 and 1882 hosted by the American Art Association in New York sealed his reputation overseas as well. When he died in 1904, a British critic hailed Vereshchagin as "one of the most remarkable figures in the whole world of art. The greatest of war painters."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being Russia's most famous painter during his lifetime internationally, Vereshchagin was its most controversial. His battle scenes focused not on dash, glory and bravery, but rather condemned war's cruelty and carnage, as well as the callous indifference and incompetence of senior commanders. Because of this unique perspective on the military, many contemporaries saw Vereshchagin as the artistic equivalent of the pacifist author Lev Tolstoy, praising Vasilij Vasil'evich as "an apostle of peace and humanity." Indeed, Vereshchagin was a runner-up for the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.<sup>9</sup> Generals were understandably less favourably disposed. Tsar Alexander II's

<sup>5</sup> Brower, 2003, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, p. 266; Bulgakov, 1905, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, p. 266.

<sup>8</sup> Newmarch, 1904, p. 1011.

<sup>9</sup> Lebedev, 1972, p. 272.

War Minister Dmitrij Miljutin recognised that Vereshchagin was “unquestionably talented,” but disliked the artist’s “curious proclivity to chose the most distasteful subjects [and] to portray only the unseemly aspects of life...”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the German Field Marshall Count Helmuth von Moltke the Elder forbade his soldiers from visiting the 1882 Berlin show for fear of ideological contamination.<sup>11</sup>

Vereshchagin’s reputation among art historians has likewise been mixed. In his history of nineteenth century Russian painting, Aleksandr N. Benois [Benua] dismissed his work as merely “photographic,” devoid of sensitivity or subtlety, while in a broader survey, a Yale art curator deemed him of “very inferior ability.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, beginning with the Stalin era, Soviets tended to praise Vereshchagin as a progressive and a forerunner of the official Socialist Realist style. According to his biographer Andrej K. Lebedev, while the painter was a “materialist of the pre-Marxist type,” who did not understand the “societal and class roots of war,” Vasilij Vasil’evich nevertheless loved the toiling masses, hated despotism, and was infused with a fervent desire to educate the people.<sup>13</sup>

Vereshchagin was also Russia’s Orientalist painter *par excellence*, using the adjective in the traditional art historical sense. An indefatigable traveller, he trekked through many Asian lands. Over the four decades that spanned his first trip to the Caucasus as a youth until his death in Pacific waters during the Russo-Japanese war, Vereshchagin journeyed to Central Asia, India, Tibet, the Ottoman Empire, the Philippines, Siberia, and Japan. Each of these trips resulted in sketches or canvases as well as published writings. Looking at his work, therefore, is the best way to consider how a nineteenth-century Russian artist saw the East. And nowhere were his views more striking than those of his two Turkestan tours in the late 1860s.

## I. The Orientalist Debate

The Islamic Orient has intrigued European painters since at least the Renaissance. At the turn of the sixteenth century, intimate contact with the Turks inspired Venetian artists like Gentile Bellini to record Near Eastern scenes and

<sup>10</sup> Miljutin, 1947, vol. 3, p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> Bulgakov, 1905, pp. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Benua [Benois], 1995, p. 286; Hamilton, 1983, p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> Lebedev, 1972, pp. 292-293.

statesmen. The seventeenth-century Dutch master Rembrandt drew on his extensive collection of imported props to execute portraits of individuals clad in sumptuous Eastern silken robes and turbans. Following more playful eighteenth-century *turquerie*, a Rococo fad for all things Ottoman, Frenchmen like the Royal Academy's Charles-André Van Loo created canvases featuring pashas, sultanas, eunuchs and odalisques in fantasy seraglios, while English aristocrats commissioned Sir Joshua Reynolds to portray them in Oriental settings.<sup>14</sup> But the Near East's artistic appeal reached its zenith in the nineteenth century with the rise of Orientalism as a distinct style of European painting.

Political developments clearly played a role. If Napoleon's Egyptian expedition began to revive interest in the region, Greece's struggle for independence in the 1820s and France's Northern African campaigns during the following decade helped to sustain it. At the same time, the West's growing dominion over the Mediterranean greatly simplified travel to the lands on its eastern and southern shores.<sup>15</sup> With their vivid sunlight, languid sensuality, and picturesque ruins they became a popular destination among painters, much as Italy had been in earlier centuries.<sup>16</sup>

Orientalism was an offshoot of Romanticism, the European reaction against eighteenth century Neo-Classicism. Predominantly French, the style featured scenes supposedly taken from daily life in the Islamic world. Some were indeed faithful genre paintings and ethnographic portraits, striking largely because of their exotic locale. At the same time, Orientalist artists often imagined scenes of excessive sexuality, violence, sloth, and other sins all entirely uninhibited by Christian morality. Luxurious harems, murderous tyrants and somnolent hashish addicts were favourite motifs.

*The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) by the French Romantic Eugène Delacroix's is typical of the genre.<sup>17</sup> Based on Lord George Byron's tragedy of 1821, the canvas shows the legendary last Assyrian king reclined on a magnificent bed calmly contemplating the execution of his concubines and horses before his own inevitable doom. Red and white silks mingle chaotically with peacock feathers, gold vessels, jewelled swords, pale feminine flesh, and a terror-stricken horse against a backdrop of fire and smoke. To remind the viewer of the cliché that Eastern licence came in many forms, a muscular

<sup>14</sup> Lemaire, 2001, pp. 20-57.

<sup>15</sup> Julian, 1977, p. 28; Verrier, 1979, pp. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Alazard, 1930, pp. 42-44.

<sup>17</sup> Porterfield, 1998, pp. 117-121; Julian, 1977, pp. 47-50.

African slave, naked save for a strategically placed black cloth, provides a homoerotic undertone.

Historians of art traditionally explained that Orientalism's popularity was driven primarily by escapism. By portraying Asia's supposed boundless carnality, savagery, indolence and luxury – all of these traits being alien to the age's sober bourgeois sensibilities – in lush and arresting colours, Orientalist paintings provided a refuge for repressed fantasies. In his 1977 book on the subject, the French specialist of exoticism Philippe Julian suggested:

“In the century of coal, whole cities lay under a mantle of drabness. An Orientalist picture in a Victorian drawing room was a kind of escape. To our great-grandparents, these canvases were not only a reminder of a different world, of something picturesque and heroic, but they hinted at pleasures that were often taboo in Europe and titillated a secret taste for cruelty and oppression.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite any possible Freudian connotations, until the 1970s academic attitudes to Orientalism were fairly benign.<sup>19</sup> However, not long ago an American author remarked, “[Orientalism is] arguably the most politically incorrect artwork going today.”<sup>20</sup> What gave the style a more sinister air was the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's profoundly influential *Orientalism*.<sup>21</sup> Taking the term in its academic sense, the author focused on orientology, or European scholarship of the Near East. Rather than being the effete pursuit of some doddering dons (or, for that matter, an artistic interest in the exotic), he saw orientology as an important weapon in the armoury of imperialism, an intellectual tool for ensuring the West's dominion over the East.

In a nutshell, Said's book argues that the scholarly apparatus whereby Europeans study Asia is a means to oppress it. Occidentals do this by thinking about the Orient as “The Other,” a mysterious, feminised, malevolent and dangerous cultural contestant. Said explains that Europeans see the world entirely in Manichean terms. In Rudyard Kipling's words, “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” The legacy of the French philosopher Michel Foucault is clear, especially in Foucault's notions of “discourse,” the linguistic apparatus whereby the dissemination of knowledge becomes a way to repress and subjugate. In Said's words, Orientalism is “a scientific movement

<sup>18</sup> Julian, 1977, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> The following four paragraphs draw on my article, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2002, pp. 249-261.

<sup>20</sup> Vincent, 1997, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> Said, 1978.

whose analogue in the world of empirical politics was the Orient's colonial accumulation and acquisition by Europe."<sup>22</sup> Even more provocatively, the author argues that Orientalism is absolutely inseparable from colonialism,

"We could not have had empire itself without important philosophical processes at work in the production as well as the acquisition, subordination and settlement of space."<sup>23</sup>

When Said refers to "the West" he usually means nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain and France. He virtually ignores other European nations with a strong orientological tradition, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Russia. Russian Orientalism is a particularly intriguing exception to Said's schema. In contrast to the maritime colonial powers, Russia conquered an empire contiguous to its own borders. If the seas separated Britain and France from "their" Orient, Russia's Eurasian geography placed no such barriers between its metropole and east. For Russians, therefore, the boundary between "self" and "Other" is much less clear-cut.

In 1993, fifteen years after he wrote *Orientalism*, Edward Said broadened his approach with *Culture and Imperialism*.<sup>24</sup> For a professor of comparative literature, it was not surprising that Said would also examine literature through his Orientalist schema. Writers such as Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen and Albert Camus now also came under his scrutiny. There is even a chapter about opera. Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, Said maintains,

"as a visual, musical, and theatrical spectacle [...] confirms the Orient as an essentially exotic, distant and antique place in which Europeans can mount certain shows of force."<sup>25</sup>

While Said paid little attention to painting, some art historians were quick to appropriate his argument about the link between representation and repression.<sup>26</sup> The most sophisticated study along these lines is Linda Nochlin's article, "The Imaginary Orient."<sup>27</sup> As a feminist academic, Nochlin naturally examined style from a gendered perspective. Thus Delacroix's Orientalism was

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, 1986, p. 215.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216.

<sup>24</sup> Said, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> But by no means all. See, for example, Rosenthal, 1982; Stevens, 1984, pp. 15-23; Vincent, 1997; Lemaire, 2001; Davies, 2005. For surveys of the debate see MacKenzie, 1995, pp. 43-71; Shalev, 1993, pp. 61-76.

<sup>27</sup> Nochlin, 1983.

motivated not by lust for imperial power, but lust pure and simple.<sup>28</sup> More intriguing is Nochlin's interpretation of the hyper-realistic approach of later Orientalists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, which she sees as deliberately deceptive. Far from being, as one contemporary put it, "one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters in our time," Gérôme pursued a calculated strategy of "realist mystification" by presenting an imaginary Orient with seemingly photographic precision.<sup>29</sup>

## II. A Difficult Student

Nochlin's observation about Gérôme could arguably also be applied to his Russian student, Vasilij Vereshchagin, who likewise took great pride in realistic representations. Vereshchagin's path to Gérôme's *atelier* in Paris was hardly predictable or direct.<sup>30</sup> Born in 1842 to a landowner of moderate means in the northwestern Government of Novgorod, he was given the typical upbringing of a future officer in the Tsar's armed forces: Tutors at home, three years at a junior military school, and another six at the Naval Cadet Corps in the capital.

The latter may well have inspired Vereshchagin's indefatigable wanderlust.<sup>31</sup> As in all navy schools, the cadets were encouraged to learn about the world beyond their homeland's shores, an effort strongly supported by directors who had included maritime explorers like the illustrious circumnavigator Admiral Ivan Fedorovich Krusenstern [Kruzenshtern]. Geography proved to be among Vereshchagin's favourite subjects, and during his spare time he repeatedly reread *The Frigate Pallada*, the novelist Ivan Goncharov's recent travel account. Along with other good students, Vereshchagin's high grades earned him cruises to Western Europe during his last two summers in school. It was during these journeys abroad that he became acquainted with writings of the radical *émigré* publisher Aleksandr Herzen [Gercen], which helped shape his progressive political views.

When Vasilij graduated at the top of his class in 1860, there was every expectation that he would join his classmates in a career with the imperial fleet.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> The most thorough biography is Lebedev, 1972. Among others, the account written by a friend shortly after his death stands out, Bulgakov, 1905, while a more recent work focuses on the artist's many travels, Demin, 1991. Aside from a spate of articles written at the turn of the twentieth century, the only English-language biography is Barooshian, 1993. There are also many details in the painter's own published autobiographical writings, such as Vereshchagin, 1895; *idem*, 1898a; *idem*, 1898b.

<sup>31</sup> Demin, 1992, p. 61.

But already at school there were some things that set him apart from the others. Although he was industrious and intelligent, the cadet proved to be sickly. More alarmingly, his sensitive stomach could not withstand seafaring. He was also subject to a nervous and excitable temperament, which according to his close friend Vladimir Stasov he had inherited from his half-Tatar mother.<sup>32</sup> And Vereshchagin liked to draw.

As a boy, Vasilij had shown a remarkable aptitude in doing sketches, a talent his more dedicated art teachers at school recognised and encouraged. When he reached his penultimate year at the corps, the curriculum no longer included drawing classes, and the cadet enrolled in the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, which functioned as a preparatory school for the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. The instructors initially regarded him as something of a dilettante. However, Vasilij's stubborn insistence that he saw his future at the easel rather than aboard ship convinced them to take him seriously.

Vereshchagin's parents humoured their son's interest for the time being. According to the conventions of the day, sketching was a perfectly acceptable parlour amusement for a member of his class. But as a living, the arts were a trade fit only for serfs and other unwashed.<sup>33</sup> When Vasilij announced that he had decided to forsake the navy for study at the Academy of Arts shortly before receiving his diploma, his parents were appalled. He later recalled their thoughts, "For the son of distinguished gentry...to become an artist – the shame!"<sup>34</sup> Unable to dissuade their son through a mother's anguished tears or a father's stern warnings of future privation, they reluctantly gave in. "Go ahead, you know you're no longer a child," he was told. "Just don't expect any help from me."<sup>35</sup>

Vereshchagin enrolled in the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts at a time of considerable turmoil for the venerable establishment. Founded nearly a century earlier by Empress Catherine the Great, and a subsidiary to the Ministry of the Court since 1850, its function was to promote the arts along European lines. An institution of imperial patronage, the Academy loyally reflected the tastes of its Romanov masters. In its early years, it had endeavoured to be at the forefront of Western tastes, and promoted then-fashionable Neo-Classicism. As the Catherinian Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century yielded

<sup>32</sup> Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, p. 215.

<sup>33</sup> Valkenier, 1989, p. 11; Stites, 2005, p. 343.

<sup>34</sup> Vereshchagin, 1895, p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 304.

to Nicholaevian obscurantism in the 1830s, the Academy ossified, remaining defiantly rooted in the aesthetics of a bygone era. The style of instruction also began to reflect the monarchy's increasingly militarised mores.<sup>36</sup> But when Emperor Nicholas I died in 1855 as his armies faced defeat against the Western powers in the Crimea, the autocracy's grip became less confident.

Within the Academy, the first to challenge the status quo were its students. Like many educated youth in the turbulent years that followed the iron Tsar's death, they sought to cast off the shackles of the past and adopt a more socially conscious ethos. One of the guiding lights of the *shestidesjatniki*, the generation of the (eighteen) sixties, was a radical priest's son from the provinces, Nikolaj Chernyshevskij. His novel of 1863, *What Is to Be Done*, with its strident summons to socialist egalitarianism, sexual emancipation, and sacrificial self-denial, became a gospel for progressive Russian youth.

Ten years earlier, Chernyshevskij had written a master's thesis on "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality"<sup>37</sup>, which proved more directly relevant to those enrolled at the Academy. Arguing that art must replicate the real world, especially that of the common people, the author called on it to condemn the iniquities of the existing order. Rather than decorating the palaces of the ruling class, he famously called for art to be "a textbook for life."<sup>38</sup> Chernyshevskij was hardly the first to advocate closer links between culture and politics either in Russia or the West. Already in 1847 the literary critic Vissarion Belinskij's open "Letter to Gogol" commanded writers to lead the struggle against the "black night of autocracy, Orthodoxy and [official] nationalism."<sup>39</sup> And, as Vladimir Stasov pointed out, elsewhere in Europe painters like Gustave Courbet attacked social injustice with their realistic canvases.<sup>40</sup> But it was Chernyshevskij's voice the *shestidesjatniki* heard most clearly.

Chernyshevskij's angry rejection of "art for art's sake" found a receptive audience among the Academy's students. In 1863 – the same year the "Salon des Refusés" defied Paris' artistic establishment – 14 students walked out of the Academy's gold medal competition, refusing to paint its obligatory theme, taken from Scandinavian mythology. Led by Ivan Kramskoj, they struck out on

<sup>36</sup> Valkenier, 1989, pp. 3-7; Jackson, 2006, pp. 9-13.

<sup>37</sup> Chernyshevskij, 1974, pp. 5-117.

<sup>38</sup> Chernyshevskij, 1974, p. 115.

<sup>39</sup> in Valkenier, 1983, p. 154.

<sup>40</sup> Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, p. 415.

their own by forming a cooperative workshop, following the model in *What Is to Be Done?* Although the venture eventually foundered, in 1870 another effort of artistic emancipation proved to be much more successful. Known as the Wanderers [*Peredvizhniki*] after their formal name, the Association of Wandering Art Exhibits, the new group would transform Russian painting into a truly national school that obeyed Chernyshevskij's dual summons to represent reality and criticise its ills with its "morally indignant" canvases.<sup>41</sup>

Vereshchagin also heeded Chernyshevskij. As he would later write in his extensive musings about his craft, "The notion of art as obedient to absolute beauty...is outdated. Instead of pure, absolute beauty, modern art...is linked to everyday life in all its aspects."<sup>42</sup> Likewise attacking "art for art's sake," he averred, "...thought and tendentiousness not only do not harm technique, but on the contrary, help to realise it."<sup>43</sup> In an essay simply titled "Realism," he proclaimed, "I count myself among the realists...who not only don't reject ideas but incorporate them in their work."<sup>44</sup>

Unlike some of his schoolmates, Vereshchagin's rebellion against the Academy took a more solitary path. He had begun his new schooling well enough, and soon became particularly close to a young liberal professor, Aleksandr Beidemann [Bejdemann], who took him along on a commission to decorate the Russian church in Paris. Once again excelling in his studies, Vasilij won a silver medal for his sketch based on Homer's *Odyssey* in his third year. However, a few months later – and half a year before the revolt of the 14 – he shocked the faculty by impetuously burning a larger sepia drawing of the same theme, "to avoid any more of such nonsense," as he explained.<sup>45</sup> Although he would not formally withdraw from the Academy until 1865, Vereshchagin spent the summer of 1863 in the Caucasus supporting himself through art lessons to Russian officers' children. Following the custom of restless Romantic poets like Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, he roamed the mountains in his spare time, filling three sketchbooks during his stay.

Vereshchagin's life took a lucky turn when, early in 1864, he inherited 1,000 rubles from his uncle. Abandoning the relative poverty of his Caucasian

<sup>41</sup> Valkenier, 1989, pp. 33-40; Stites, 2005, pp. 413-418; Jackson, 2006, pp. 27-33. Although less objective, a good overview of the general trends of Russian art at the time by a champion of the Association is the article by Stasov, «Dvadcat' pjat' let russkogo iskusstva," in Stasov, 1952, vol. 2. pp. 391-472.

<sup>42</sup> Vereshchagin, 1898a, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Vereshchagin, 1990, p. 194.

<sup>45</sup> Bulgakov, 1905, p. 28.

existence, the aspiring young artist travelled to Paris and talked himself into an apprenticeship with a new professor at the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts, Jean-Léon Gérôme. When the latter asked who had recommended him, Vereshchagin cockily replied, “Your paintings,” adding, “I will study only with you and with no one else.”<sup>46</sup>

Gérôme had begun his career two decades earlier specialising in Classical themes, but added the Near East to his repertoire after several journeys there in the 1850s. His Oriental canvases were characterised by dramatic light and colour, as well as highly realistic brush, all reminiscent of the Dutch Golden Age.<sup>47</sup> Because of the artist’s scientific attention to local detail, some contemporaries classified him a “peintre ethnographe.”<sup>48</sup>

Vereshchagin’s sojourns in Gérôme’s atelier left their mark. Both in technique and choice of subject, the Russian student’s canvases betray the strong influence of his Parisian master. Yet, although they would remain on cordial terms, Vereshchagin’s relationship with his new school was little better than with the Academy back in St. Petersburg. After about a year of chafing under Gérôme’s insistence that he copy Neo-Classical paintings at the Louvre Museum, Vereshchagin decamped once more for the Caucasus.

Vereshchagin’s second voyage to the Russian highlands set the pattern for many of his future travels. Over the course of six months, he produced numerous sketches of the region and its people. The latter encyclopaedically recorded the various national types with photographic accuracy. The artist’s interest in exotic local customs led to a characteristically macabre drawing of self-flagellants during a Shiite festival in Nagorno-Karabakh, “A Religious Procession of the Moharrem Celebration at Shusha.” Vereshchagin also wrote a detailed account, which was soon published in the popular French monthly *Le Tour du Monde* [Around the World].<sup>49</sup> Extensively illustrated, the travelogue was full of clichés about the barbarous, menacing Orient, from filthy, drink-addled Kalmuk nomads and thieving gypsies to “audacious, coarse and vengeful” Kabardians.<sup>50</sup> Despite having been pacified by Russian arms, the

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> The latter is argued convincingly in Ackerman, 1986a, pp. 75-80.

<sup>48</sup> Largely neglected after his death at the turn of the twentieth century, the artist was rehabilitated in the 1980s by the American art historian Gerald Ackerman, whose biography remains the definitive study: Ackerman, 1986b. See also Lafont-Couturier, 1998; and Lemaire, 2001, pp. 238-242.

<sup>49</sup> Vereshchagin 1868, pp. 162-208; *idem*, 1869, pp. 241-336.

<sup>50</sup> *Idem*, 1868, p. 196.

threat of violence was ever present, driven by “religious fanaticism, and the hate common to tribes subjugated by their conquerors.”<sup>51</sup>

Vereshchagin left the Caucasus in autumn 1865 with high hopes of publishing a journal dedicated to the region, but could not raise the necessary start-up capital. He therefore returned to Paris, where he proudly showed his drawings to Gérôme. While full of praise, his teacher suggested that he should now master the more difficult skill of painting in oils. This time Vereshchagin took the advice, and he began working hard to acquire the new craft.

On holiday at his father's estate the following spring, a new subject captured Vereshchagin's imagination.<sup>52</sup> Strolling along a nearby river, he became intrigued by groups of men labouring to pull barges against its current.<sup>53</sup> These former serfs who toiled endlessly for a pittance were a perfect example of the gritty Russian reality Chernyshevskij had urged artists to portray. As impoverished masses seemingly inescapably tied to a heavy burden, the boat-haulers were a perfect metaphor for the tsarist autocracy. In subsequent years, several Wanderers would capture such scenes, most notably Il'ja Repin in his famous *Boat-haulers on the Volga* of 1870-1873. Vereshchagin prepared a number of studies and he might well have completed a major canvas had an intriguing job offer not intervened.

### III. To Turkestan

During a conversation with his former Academy professor in the summer of 1867, Vereshchagin learned that General Kaufman, the Tsar's new Governor-General to Turkestan, wanted to hire a young artist for his headquarters in Tashkent. There would be considerable hardship and danger, since Russian troops were still actively campaigning in the Central Asian province. Nevertheless, Vereshchagin rushed to offer his services to the general.

“I had no *passionate love for the East*, God forbid!” he later told a friend. “*I studied in the East because I was freer there...than in the West. Instead of a Parisian garret or some room...on Vasil'evskij Island [in St. Petersburg], I would have a Kirghiz yurt...*”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.

<sup>52</sup> Lebedev, 1972, pp. 49-53.

<sup>53</sup> An American author suggests that the idea may well have come from a painting of a similar scene on the Nile Delta by the French Orientalist Léon Belly, «Fellaheen Hauling a Dabbieh.” Exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1864, the year he arrived in Paris to study at the École des Beaux-Arts, Vereshchagin would likely have seen the canvas: Davies, 2005, pp. 72-75.

<sup>54</sup> Italics in the original. In Lebedev, 1972, p. 54.

The prospect of seeing some action also appealed to him,

“...I wanted to know real war, about which I had read and heard so much, and which had been my neighbour in the Caucasus.”<sup>55</sup>

Satisfied with his educational credentials and the quality of his sketches, Kaufman took him on. The artist was given the rank of a junior officer, although he characteristically insisted that he work in *mufit* and enjoy full freedom of movement.

After some hurried preparations, Vereshchagin set out in August from Orenburg, a major trading centre in south-western Siberia on the Central Asian steppe frontier.<sup>56</sup> He proceeded on the post road to Tashkent by tarantass, a basket-like wooden chariot uninhibited by springs once described by a French account as resembling “an instrument of torture.”<sup>57</sup> The 2,000-kilometre journey took him south to the Aral Sea and then southeast along the Syr Darya, reaching the colonial capital in six weeks. Aside from the typical discomforts of travelling through a largely untamed land, it was an uneventful journey.

Vereshchagin’s first impression of his new hometown was hardly favourable. He recalled,

“For those acquainted with the Levant, Tashkent offers nothing new: One sees mostly mud houses, oil-paper windows, greyish walls, and tortuous narrow streets where the rains dig muddy pits that swallow horses right up to their knees.”<sup>58</sup>

Taking an apartment in a local quarter, he busied himself over the next few months capturing the architecture and the remarkable ethnic diversity of the population in his sketchbooks.

The artist was particularly interested in Tashkent’s less salubrious aspects, including its opium dens, beggar guilds, prisons, and *bachas* [dancing boys]. He did point out that things had been even worse before tsarist troops had captured the city a dozen years earlier, as there had also been thousands of slaves then. While he occasionally detected undercurrents of hostility, like many of his compatriots Vereshchagin was convinced that most of the new Russian subjects were becoming reconciled to their rulers. As the inhabitants of a suburb greeted him warmly he mused,

<sup>55</sup> In Bulgakov, 1905, p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> The journey is described in Vereshchagin, 1873, pp. 193-272.

<sup>57</sup> E. Blanc, «Notes de voyage en Asie centrale. À travers la Transoxiane,” *Revue des deux mondes*, vol. 129 (1895), p. 904, cited in Kanterbaeva-Bill, 2005, p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> Vereshchagin, 1873, p. 211.

“Were they sincere? Allah alone, who knows their hearts, can say. Perhaps they were, since we know that in Central Asia the Infidels govern with greater firmness and justice than the indigenous potentates.”<sup>59</sup>

The following spring, the general sent his artist on an ethnographic survey of the provincial countryside. Accompanied by a Tatar translator who claimed princely blood and two Cossacks, Vereshchagin made his way southward along the upper Syr Darya to study the local Kirghiz and Sart communities. About thirty kilometres from Tashkent, there were reports that Kaufman was marching on the Emir of Bukhara. “War!” his thoughts raced. “And so close to me, right here in Central Asia!”<sup>60</sup> This was clearly more interesting than folklore.

The object of Kaufman’s assault was Samarkand, Tamerlane’s ancient capital. Vereshchagin hastened to the fabled city, but much to his disappointment it had fallen the day before his arrival. Nevertheless, there were magnificent medieval monuments to be drawn, and he put his pencil to work. The young artist’s wish to see combat close up soon came true when, shortly after Kaufman left Samarkand with the bulk of his troops to pursue the Emir, the local population rose against the Russian garrison.<sup>61</sup> For a week in early June, the 500-man force the general had left behind held out against overwhelming odds. Seizing a rifle from a fallen soldier, Vereshchagin took a major role in the defence. At one point, when some troops wavered during a counterattack, he rallied them by storming ahead with the shout “Brothers, after me!” He also joined two sorties out of the citadel into the labyrinthine city streets beyond, narrowly escaping death on both occasions when his comrades rescued him from encounters with the enemy.

Vereshchagin displayed fearlessness off the battlefield as well. After the siege had been lifted, he criticised Kaufman in front of his staff for not having done more to secure the fortress. Although one subordinate indignantly suggested that the artist be shot for insubordination, the general did not take offence and even nominated him for the Cross of St. George, Russia’s highest decoration for military bravery.<sup>62</sup> At the time, Vereshchagin objected to the distinction, but relented when the order’s council voted to award him the medal and proudly wore it on his civilian jacket for the rest of his days. Fiercely

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 263.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 248.

<sup>61</sup> Vereshchagin, 1898, pp. 1-60. See also Maksheev, 1890, pp. 268-273; Terent’ev, 1906, vol. 1, pp. 453-471.

<sup>62</sup> V. V. Vereshchagin to V. V. Stasov, letter, 20/09/1882, in Lebedev, 1951, vol. 2, p. 134.



*Vasilij Vereshchagin.*  
After Victory, 1868.



*Vasilij Vereshchagin.*  
After Defeat, 1868.

protective of his independence, the painter would refuse all other honours during his career, even a professorship at the Imperial Academy.<sup>63</sup>

The events in Samarkand took their toll on Vereshchagin's fragile health. Succumbing to a fever, he decided to travel to Paris to continue work on his paintings. Although his hopes of organising a show in the French capital did not materialise, *Le Tour du Monde* did buy his travel account once again. Early in the following year, the artist got word that his former employer was back in St. Petersburg. Might he be convinced to sponsor an exhibition? The general, who was eager to show off his young province to the Russian public, readily gave his consent when Vereshchagin put the question to him.

For a month in spring 1869, the Turkestan Exhibition occupied three rooms at the Ministry of State Domains on the Mojka Canal, displaying stuffed animals, mineral specimens, costumes, artefacts, as well as the artist's own sketches and paintings. With its central location just south of St. Isaac's Cathedral and free admission, it attracted large crowds. Emperor Alexander II paid a visit on the opening day with Kaufman as his guide, and expressed his satisfaction. However, when the Tsar asked for the painter to be presented to him, the latter made himself scarce. "I don't like to do the bidding of important men," he later explained to his brother.<sup>64</sup>

The highlight was the room with Vereshchagin's own canvases, which featured two battle scenes, *After Victory* and *After Defeat*, as well as a genre painting, *The Opium Eaters*. There was also a photo of another oil painting, *The Bacha and His Admirers*. Because it portrayed an anxious young dancing boy in girl's dress surrounded by a group of well-fed middle-aged Central Asian men as they greedily eye their quarry, the painting had been destroyed earlier on the grounds that it might offend.<sup>65</sup>

Viewers were particularly struck by *The Opium Eaters*.<sup>66</sup> Narcotics were a favourite theme of Orientalist art, which often included a narghile or hashish pipe in its harems and souks.<sup>67</sup> What made this work unusual was its objective approach, utterly devoid of moralising disapproval or clichéd exoticism. Although it clearly portrayed an Eastern setting, it struck the critic Andrej Somov

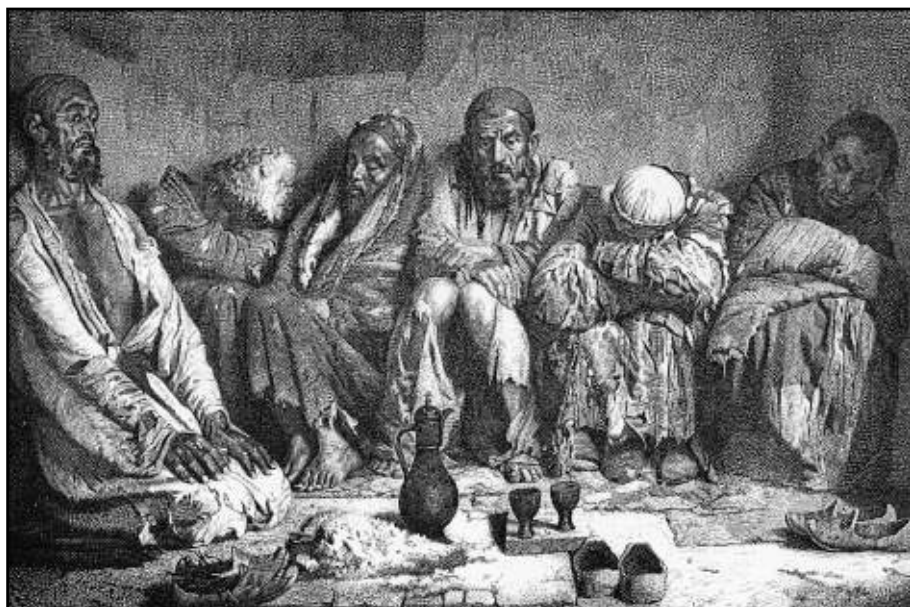
<sup>63</sup> Vereshchagin's public refusal of the appointment generated a lively controversy. See Lebedev, 1950, vol. 1, pp. 20-25, 30-31. He also turned down the Order of St Stanislaus: Lebedev, 1951, vol. 2, p. 320, n. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Lebedev, 1972, p. 76.

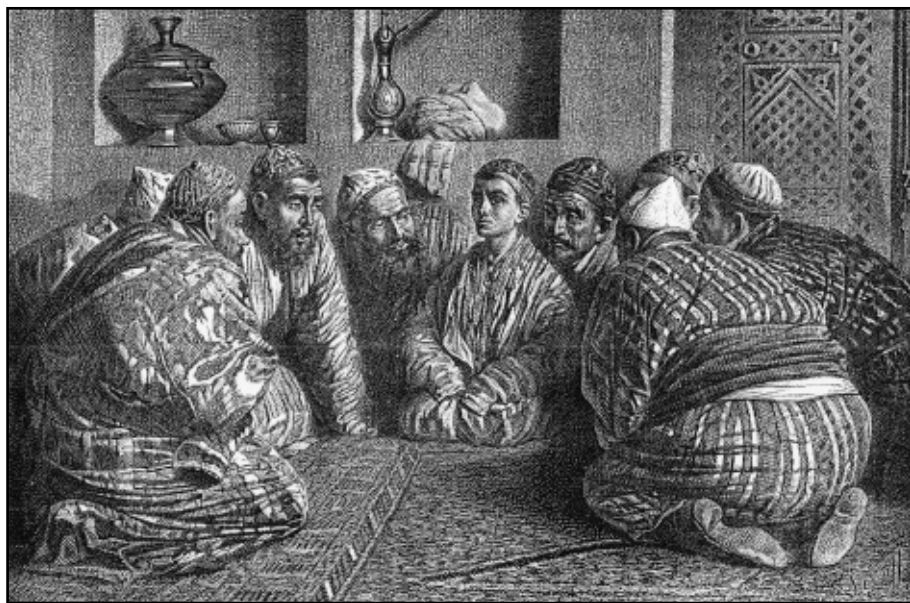
<sup>65</sup> Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, p. 235; Bulgakov, 1905, p. 54.

<sup>66</sup> The scene was based on personal observation. See Vereshchagin, 1873, p. 224.

<sup>67</sup> On "the pleasures of the pipe" in Orientalist art, see Davies, 2005, pp. 121-143.



*Vasilij Vereshchagin. The Opium Eaters, 1868.*



*Vasilij Vereshchagin. The Bacha and His Admirers, 1868.*

as a more general comment about human degradation.<sup>68</sup> Vereshchagin hinted that Asians were no more predisposed to the vice than others when he mused, "...is the day far off when opium will become widespread in Europe, as if Europe does not already consume enough Western opium, that is to say tobacco?"<sup>69</sup>

The two other paintings, *After Victory* and *After Defeat* rebut the notion of Oriental and Occidental as polar opposites. One featured two Uzbeks contemplating their trophy of a dead Russian soldier's severed head, while in the other a tsarist colonial rifleman casually smokes his pipe as Central Asian casualties litter the ground around his feet. In displaying these two scenes of man's indifference to the savagery of war, the artist suggested that East and West were actually not so far apart. As if to stress this point, he ironically titled the first canvas *After Victory* and the second, *After Defeat*, i.e., from the enemy's perspective.

Encouraged by the success of his first exhibition, Vereshchagin headed back to Central Asia as soon as the show closed in April 1869. Kaufman now arranged an appointment for Vasilij Vasil'evich at the civilian rank of collegiate registrar on the staff of Major-General Gerasim Kolpakovskij, his deputy as governor of the Semirech'e district in Eastern Turkestan. Based in Tashkent over the next year, the artist travelled extensively throughout the province. Once again, he did not hesitate to seek out danger. On one occasion Vereshchagin joined a Cossack raid deep into Chinese territory to discipline Islamic insurgents, earning more laurels by saving the life of the unit's commander.

Kaufman was clearly pleased with his painter. When Vereshchagin returned to St. Petersburg in 1870, the general awarded him a three-year stay abroad to translate his Central Asian experiences into art. The official goal would be to "acquaint the civilised world with the life of a little-known people and to enrich learning with materials important for the study of the region." Left unsaid was the equally important motive of allaying European suspicions about tsarist colonial expansion.<sup>70</sup>

This time the destination was Munich. Because of the Prussian War, Paris was not an attractive option that year. The Bavarian capital also happened to be the home of a young lady friend, Elisabeth Marie Fisher, whose hand he soon took. To simulate Turkestan's bright desert light, Vereshchagin designed

<sup>68</sup> Kistin, 1869. p. 3. Affiliated with the Imperial Academy of Art, the critic was the father of the World of Art painter Konstantin Andreevich Somov.

<sup>69</sup> Vereshchagin, 1873, p. 224.

<sup>70</sup> Barooshian, 1993, pp. 32-33.

a special open studio that rotated on rails to keep his models fully lit by the sun as it rose and set. He worked with a frantic energy, and by 1873 had completed an impressive 35 canvases. They would be a sensation.

#### IV. Poèmes Barbares

Vereshchagin's Turkestan series consisted of genre paintings and battle scenes, in addition to a few ethnographic studies. While some were imaginary, many were based on personal experience and observation. Together, they justified Russia's mission in Central Asia by invoking Orientalist tropes about despotism, cruelty, fallen glory, and vice. Yet some canvases also raised disturbing questions about the conquerors themselves.

The notion of stagnation and barbarism amidst traces of greatness in centuries long past was a major theme in Western perceptions of the East at the time. Vereshchagin captured this idea in two paintings that contrast the Timurid Empire at its apogee with the miserable reality of the present. *At Tamerlane's Doors* (1872) imagines a fourteenth century view of the conqueror's palace in Samarkand. Possibly inspired by Gérôme's *The Seraglio's Guard* (1859), it features a pair of sentries armed to the teeth as they stand watching in perfect symmetry over its entrance. Some critics have pointed out that the men in their finely decorated robes are purely ornamental, for the main subject is the pair of massive wooden doors at the centre. To emphasize their master's despotic power, they face inward rather than toward the viewer, while the intricately carved doors, half-hidden in shadow, heighten the air of mystery.

No such awesome majesty attends *At the Mosque's Gate's* (1873), the previous painting's contemporary companion. Rather than two formidable guards, a sad duo of mendicants with begging bowls await the worshippers' alms at the entrance of a Central Asian mosque in Vereshchagin's own day. Gone too is the symmetry of the men; one of the paupers leans on his staff, while his companion is hunched in quiet sleep. And instead of shadowy darkness, these doors, now in the full glare of the sun, clearly show signs of age.

Vereshchagin must have had a change of heart about the propriety of certain themes when he painted *The Sale of the Child Slave* (1872). Anticipating Gérôme's well-known *The Snake Charmer* (1880), it is a commentary on two evils that Europeans commonly associated with the East at the time, slavery and pederasty. In his tiny shop, a merchant slyly extols the quality of his ware to

the wealthy, aged client, who lustfully eyes a nude boy while hypocritically counting his prayer beads. Again, the painter effectively manipulates light and shadow to heighten the contrast between the old man's luxuriant bright yellow silk robe and white turban with the child's innocent nakedness.

Vereshchagin paid little attention to heterosexual motifs. Whereas harems and odalisques abounded in Orientalist art, they are entirely absent from his Turkestan series. Indeed, women almost never made an appearance in any guise whatsoever.<sup>71</sup> This lacuna was hardly an expression of misogyny. Like Chernyshevskij, the artist advocated female emancipation, and his travelogues waxed indignant about sexual inequality in Central Asia,

“From the cradle, sold to a man; as a child taken by that man, when she is neither psychologically nor physically mature, she never lives a real life, for childbirth ages her [and she will spend the rest of her days] exploited and withered by a beast of burden's toil.”<sup>72</sup>

The only exception was a relatively little-known work, *Uzbek Woman in Tashkent* (1873), which portrayed a female passer-by entirely hidden by her burqa and face mesh. The only glimpse of skin is a small flash of wrist accidentally exposed amidst the sexless garment's folds. The painter underscores his protest against the confined segregation of women in Central Asia by placing the subject next to a tall, prison-like wall that entirely cuts her off from the blue sky and green trees beyond.

The Oriental's cruelty to his fellow man featured more prominently in Vereshchagin's art. One canvas, *The Samarkand Zindan* (1873) imagined the citadel's notorious subterranean prison with its doomed inmates, which the painter saw before Kaufman ordered its destruction.<sup>73</sup> Even more dramatic was a reconstruction of another scene before the Russian capture, *They Rejoice* (1872). On Samarkand's market square, with the decaying turquoise façade of the great seventeenth century Shir-Dor [*Shīr Dār*] mosque as backdrop, a *mullā* exhorts the faithful to *jihād* against the Infidel. In the foreground a variety of spectators, from the Emir and merchants on camel back to beggars and feral dogs, watch the scene. Separating the onlookers from the rest of the crowd is a straight line of ten tall poles with darkened tops, which on closer scrutiny prove to be the heads of Russian casualties. The following words from the

<sup>71</sup> Nor for that matter, did women appear in many of his other paintings. Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, pp. 445-446.

<sup>72</sup> Vereshchagin, 1873, p. 227.

<sup>73</sup> Bulgakov, 1905, p. 64.

Qur'an, as the painting's epigraph, remind the European viewer of Islam's proverbial fanaticism: "Thus God commands, that all infidels die! There is no God but God..."<sup>74</sup>

If the genre paintings in his Turkestan series repeated many Orientalist motifs, Vereshchagin's battle scenes were much less stereotypical. Some effectively conveyed the excitement of combat. Based on Vasilij Vasil'evich's own experience during the siege of Samarkand, *At the Fortress Wall*. "Hush. Let Them Enter!" (1872) pictures a group of desert troops preparing to meet an anticipated enemy strike through a break in the crumbling defences.<sup>75</sup> The title refers to the reply the commanding officer gave Vereshchagin when the latter suggested rushing out to attack the foe. The men's anxious expressions, their erect bayonets, and the composition – a broadening white line pushing against the grey of the shaded barrier – all convey the tense moments before the clash.

Likewise inspired by an episode the artist witnessed, *Mortally Wounded* (1873) presents war in a distinctly minor key.<sup>76</sup> Shot in the chest, a dying soldier staggers ahead as red blood begins to stain his white tunic. An enveloping cloud of thick dust and smoke suggests his imminent departure from the living. According to a Russian specialist of the genre,

"All war artists have pictured casualties as an inevitable accessory of crowded battle scenes, but until Vereshchagin no one ever made a wounded soldier the main subject of a virtually solitary scene."<sup>77</sup>

If this it was not an image that glorified the profession of arms, others actually led to serious accusations of defaming the Russian army's honour. The most controversial was *Forgotten* (1871). On a riverbank lies the body of a single Russian private recently killed in combat. Abandoned by his comrades, his flesh is soon to become food for flocks of approaching carrion crows. The painting's epigraph cites a mournful folk-song:

"Tell my young widow,  
That I took another bride;  
We were wed by a sabre sharp,  
Put to bed by mother damp earth..."<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 139.

<sup>75</sup> Vereshchagin, 1898b, p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Artemov, 2002, p. 206.

<sup>78</sup> Lebedev, 1972, p. 102.

Even his patron, General Kaufman, upbraided the artist for this scene, and the Tsar himself was rumoured to have expressed his displeasure.<sup>79</sup> Mortified, Vereshchagin burned the canvas along with two others he also feared were impertinent.

Their combination of exotic vistas, thrilling action and macabre realism made the Turkestan series an instant success with the public. Since Russia was still very much on the margins of the European art world, Vereshchagin arranged his debut in a more cosmopolitan setting, at London's Crystal Palace. The reviews for the exhibition, which opened in April 1873, were almost universally positive. The *Pall Mall Gazette* praised the paintings as, "very luminous and spirited pieces...giving us the acquaintance of an original and considerable artist," while *The Spectator's* critic gushed, "They are not like anything that has ever before been seen in England; they stand alone in their beauty and barbarism. The colour of them, the cruelty of them!"<sup>80</sup>

Vereshchagin's choice of London as his venue was intriguing. At the time, Britons were particularly anxious about Russian ambitions in Central Asia, which they regarded as a threat to India. The artist portrayed his empire's advance much like Foreign Minister Prince Aleksander Gorchakov's famous circular of 1864, which had justified the conquest of Tashkent as a perfectly normal action for "all civilised states that come into contact with half-savage, wandering tribes..."<sup>81</sup> In the preface of his exhibition's catalogue, Vereshchagin drew an even more explicit parallel with British colonial expansion,

"The Central Asian population's barbarism is so glaring, its economic and social condition so degraded, that the sooner European civilisation penetrates into the land, whether from one side or the other, the better."<sup>82</sup>

He added that he hoped his paintings would "assist in dispelling the distrust of the English public towards their natural friends and neighbours in Central Asia."<sup>83</sup> Some visitors to the Crystal Palace show were sympathetic to his reasoning. In its review, *The Times* commented with apparent approval on the

<sup>79</sup> Alexander II's attitude to the Turkestan series remains a point of debate. Those who knew the artist well, like Stasov and Bulgakov, claim that the Tsar thought highly of the Turkestan series, while Lebedev argues the opposite. Stasov, 1952, vol. 2, p. 247; Bulgakov, 1905, pp. 64-66; Lebedev, 1972, pp. 126-127. See also Nikitenko, 2005, vol. 3, pp. 426-427.

<sup>80</sup> «Sketches», 1873, p. 11; «Khiva», 1873, p. 470.

<sup>81</sup> Gorchakov, 1983, p. 287.

<sup>82</sup> Retranslated from the Russian in Lebedev, 1972, p. 119.

<sup>83</sup> Cited in «Sketches», 1873, p. 11.

“war with such fierce barbarians as these Central Asian Mongols and mixed breeds of all shades between Persian and Tartar, with whom Russia has waged so determined and costly a struggle for so many years.”<sup>84</sup>

Vereshchagin brought his Turkestan series to St. Petersburg the following year. Exhibited at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the show attracted “countless multitudes.”<sup>85</sup> Despite – or perhaps because of – murmurs of official disapproval, the show garnered generally good reviews in the press as well as the enthusiastic praise of other artists. The author Vsevolod Garshin was moved to pen a verse “At Vereshchagin’s First Show,” Modest Musorgskij composed a ballad based on *Forgotten*, while Nikolaj Kramskoj, a leading member of the Wanderers, wrote, “...it is a milestone, a conquest of Russia, far greater than Kaufman’s victory.”<sup>86</sup> Although the painter was unable to interest the Tsar in buying the paintings, the Moscow-based industrialist Pavel Tret’jakov soon acquired them for his collection.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Vereshchagin left St. Petersburg even before his show at the Interior Ministry had ended. This time he sailed to India with his wife, where he would spend two years travelling throughout the immense colony. Although at times his progress was hampered by British suspicions that the former navy officer was a tsarist spy, Vereshchagin’s canvases of the journey were entirely apolitical, and focused on the subcontinent’s exotic architecture, people and scenery in rich, bright colours.

Vereshchagin never completed all the paintings he had planned, since rising tensions in the Balkans between the Orthodox population and its Ottoman overlords soon drew his attention. By the time war had broken out between Russia and Turkey in April 1877, he had secured himself a posting to the staff of a senior tsarist general to see the action first-hand. Even more than his Turkestan battle scenes, the works that resulted from his year at the front captured the difficult campaign in all its inglorious misery. While he again fully supported St. Petersburg’s military aims, his brush highlighted the grim toll on the troops and the callous indifference of their commanders.

The following three decades would include extensive sojourns in Palestine, the Philippines, North America, and Japan, all of which yielded more paintings. It was during a second voyage to Northeast Asia as the island empire took up

<sup>84</sup> «Central Asia at the Crystal Palace,” *The Times*, 7 April 1873, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Nikitenko, 2005, vol. 3, p. 126.

<sup>86</sup> In Bulgakov, 1905, p. 12.

arms against Russia that the artist met his end on March 31st, 1904 aboard the naval commander's flagship when it struck a mine in Manchurian waters off Port-Arthur.

## V. Going to the People

What was Central Asia to Vereshchagin? When he learned that Stasov was writing an article about his exhibition for the prominent St. Petersburg daily *Novoe Vremja*, he dashed off a letter explaining his thinking behind the Turkestan series. The artist suggested that he could have focused on colourful Oriental costumes. But he really had a much more serious aim in mind. "My main purpose," he continued, was "...to describe the barbarism with which until now the *entire way of life and order* of Central Asia has been saturated."<sup>87</sup>

Vereshchagin had grouped seven of the series' paintings together under the title "Poèmes Barbares." Based partly on episodes in Kaufman's ongoing small wars, he intended them to be "chapters" in a narrative about a successful raid by the Emir of Bukhara's forces on a tsarist unit. Beginning with *They Observe* (1873), which pictured Uzbek and Kirghiz scouts as they spy on their foe, the canvases took the viewer through the assault, the Russians' last stand, the tribute of their severed heads to the Emir back in Tashkent, celebrations on the market square (*They Rejoice*), and the prayer of thanksgiving at Tamerlane's grave.

The final "chapter" of the "Barbaric Poems" was also Vereshchagin's best-known work, *Apotheosis of War* (1871-1872). On a light brown post-apocalyptic desert plain, against a backdrop of an ancient city's ruins and Dali-esque desiccated trees, an enormous pyramid of white human skulls rises into the cloudless blue sky. The only sign of life is a flock of black ravens searching in vain for remnants of carrion on the fleshless heads. The artist had initially planned to title the work *Apotheosis of Tamerlane*, since it was inspired by accounts of the Khan's custom to build such monuments. However, Prussia's recent clash with France reminded him that war's cruel violence remained as much a feature of his century as it had been of the fourteenth. To stress this point, he inscribed the frame with the ironic epigraph, "Dedicated to all great conquerors, past, present and future."<sup>88</sup>

The subtext is obvious. If the Oriental was barbarous, the Occidental could be just as uncivilised. There was no fundamental difference between East and

<sup>87</sup> Italics in the original. Vereshchagin to Stasov, Letter, mid-March 1874, in Lebedev, 1950, vol. 1, p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Bulgakov, 1905, p. 139.

West. War was the clearest proof. In his letter to Stasov about the Turkestan series, he concluded with this point: “I must remind you of the fact that both warring sides appeal to a single God... a truth that is just as valid in Asia as it is in enlightened Europe.”<sup>89</sup> Whether a soldier took to arms with the cry “Allahu Akbar!” “S nami Bog!” or “Gott mit uns!” the tragic outcome was the same. The implication to a generation of Russians who flaunted their atheism was that religious zeal led to fanaticism and violence among all nations, regardless of race or creed.

A firm believer in progress and the perfectibility of man, Vereshchagin did not presume that Turkestan was eternally condemned to barbarism. Given the proper circumstances, the East could reach the same level of development as the West. What was necessary was the fatherly guidance of the latter. Europeans, including his own compatriots, had a duty to bring civilisation to their Asian brethren, a task best accomplished by conquest and rule. According to Vereshchagin,

“Whatever the cost, and with all due respect to the law and justice, the question [of colonising Turkestan] must be settled, and with the least possible delay. It concerns not just Russia’s future in Asia, but above all the well being of those under our rule. In truth, they have more to gain from seeing our authority definitively established than to return to their former tyranny...”<sup>90</sup>

The artist’s conception of Russia’s mission in Central Asia was the colonial equivalent of “going to the people,” the vast Populist migration to the Russian countryside in the summers of 1873 and 1874 to bring enlightenment to the peasantry. There was no inherent contradiction between left-leaning sentiments and championing General Kaufman’s small wars. The German socialist Friedrich Engels once explained to his associate Karl Marx:

“Russia in truth performs a progressive task in the East... Russian rule is a civilising force for the Black and Caspian Seas, as well as for Central Asia...”<sup>91</sup>

While the Tsar’s attitude to Vereshchagin’s Turkestan series remains unclear, some paintings did offend a number of his senior officials. Many of the battle scenes portrayed Russia’s Central Asian campaign in a distinctly inglorious light. The artist’s own political views – some labelled him a nihilist – did not help. Yet contrary to his reputation in later years, Vereshchagin was not dogmatically pacifist. He never questioned tsarist ambitions in Turkestan.

<sup>89</sup> Vereshchagin to Stasov, Letter, mid-March 1874, in Lebedev, 1950, vol. 1, p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Vereshchagin, 1873, p. 222.

<sup>91</sup> In Lebedev, 1972, p. 57.

During Russia's war with Turkey in 1877-1878, he fully supported the war aims, even if his brush produced a scathing critique of the way they were executed. Indeed, when his brother, Alexandre, considered leaving the military after being wounded on the Balkan front during that conflict, he urged him to stay on and fulfil his duty to fatherland and family.<sup>92</sup> And when Japan went to war with Russia in 1904, he bombarded Tsar Nicholas II with letters urging him to take a firm stance against the "yellow faces." He also offered his help, "If my sabre isn't strong, permit my pencil to serve you."<sup>93</sup> What Vereshchagin did oppose were the excesses of war and the incompetence of the generals who waged it.

At the same time, as an artist who firmly believed in his obligation to portray reality, Vereshchagin considered himself honour bound to avoid glorifying or sentimentalising an inherently cruel enterprise. To him, the way painters traditionally portrayed war was fraudulent. In a discussion of the more established military artist August-Alexander von Kotzebue he explained:

"He was a battle painter of the old school... On his canvases it was obvious that [soldiers] attacked, charged, manoeuvred, took prisoners and died as the academy taught, and entirely according to the official accounts of the commanders, in other words, as they wanted it to be known and not as it really happened."<sup>94</sup>

## **Conclusion**

During his productive career, Vereshchagin displayed his work in thirty shows throughout Europe and North America. His deft attention to such theatrical details as Asian costumes, curios and artefacts, as well as, on occasion, background music, combined with his insistence that admission prices be kept low, invariably attracted masses of enthusiastic visitors wherever his exhibitions were held. The shows were invariably accompanied by catalogues with extensive commentaries discussing some aspect of each painting's intent. In the words of two art historians,

"This was a special genre... Rather than being explanations of the works, [the commentaries] were verbal variations on one or another artistic 'theme'."<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Vereshchagin to Stasov, Letter, 4/10/1877, in Lebedev, 1950, vol. 1, p. 192.

<sup>93</sup> Vereshchagin to Nicholas II, Letter, 18/2/1904, in Vereshchagin, 1931, p. 169.

<sup>94</sup> Vereshchagin, 1898a, p. 146.

<sup>95</sup> Vereshchagin, 1990, p. 18.

Vereshchagin wrote prolifically. His publications include a dozen books and about 80 articles, many of which were translated into French, German and English.<sup>96</sup> They range over a wide variety of topics, from travel accounts, and memoirs to the artist's thoughts about art, history, and current events. There is even a novel, *Literator* (published in English as *The War Correspondent*). A semi-autobiographical story about the rivalry of a progressive journalist and a well-born staff officer for a young woman's heart set in the Russo-Turkish War. Its earnest tone is vaguely reminiscent of Chernyshevskij's *What is to Be Done?*<sup>97</sup>

Neither Vereshchagin's brush nor pen shied away from expressing strong opinions. When it came to Central Asia, these included a strong faith in Russia's *mission civilisatrice*, the duty of all modern nations to bear the benefits of more enlightened ways to their less advanced brethren. In this way, General von Kaufman's campaign in Turkestan happened to coincide with the artist's progressive political leanings. At the same time, his commitment to Chernyshevskij's credo of critical realism obligated him to present war's brutal cost to Russian conscripts with searing honesty. As a student of one of Paris' foremost teachers, Vereshchagin naturally adopted the tropes of Orientalist art about the East's cruelty, fanaticism, and vice. Nevertheless, as his writings make clear, there was no fundamental Saidian distinction between European "Self" and Asian "Other." In an oft-quoted remark he made in later years, he repeated his firm belief that the two were not really quite so far apart:

"We often hear claims that our century is highly civilised, and that it is hard to imagine how mankind could possibly develop even further. Isn't the opposite really true? Wouldn't it be better to accept that mankind has only made the most tentative steps in all directions, and that we still live in the age of barbarism?"<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> The most complete bibliography is in Lebedev, 1972, pp. 350-353.

<sup>97</sup> Vereshchagin, 1894.

<sup>98</sup> Vereshchagin, 1898a, p. 82.

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