

La Crimea tra Russia, Italia e Impero ottomano

a cura di Aldo Ferrari ed Elena Pupulin

The Artistic Renaissance of the Crimea

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Abstract Experiencing Crimean landscape and architecture through representations were enticing for the nineteenth century Russian artists, writers and travellers. Works by Lev Lagorio, Ivan Aivazovsky, Fedor Vasiliev, the Chrnetzovs brothers and many more are paradigmatic examples of the visualization and appropriation of the distant landscapers, involving the eye of the Russian beholder, the practice of travel as a displacement from home, and the role of painting and photography as a souvenir authenticating experience. Most of these representations from early sketches to photography, reflect a cultural identity that is different from that of the places they describe and the consolidated sense of Russia through the mirror of its ‘others’.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Building the New Artistic Criteria Inside the Old School. – 3 Crimean ‘picturesque’ and Its Meaning to Us. – 4 Silvestr Shchedrin’s Passions for Italy. – 5 Maxim Vorobyev’s *Les Enfants du paradis*. – 6 Aivazovsky’s Unsettling Epic. – 7 The Art of Quietness: Fedor Vasiliev.

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1 Introduction

The streaming lectures, online articles and blogs, have placed the last nails into the coffin of the political history of the Crimea. Paradoxically, the art historians showed a lesser enthusiasm until this day.¹

Now aged 230, Crimea (fig. 1) under the Russian rule² has absorbed an entire spectrum of cultural influences and historical references. It served as summer destination for many generations of Russians, while the Crimean picturesque and quaint gardens and villas became the customary *socio-type* of the dyed-in-the-wool Russian bourgeoisie from St. Petersburg and provinces. In these happy months spent by the Black sea, they pictured themselves in a Paradise, and a Paradise it was.

1 With an exception of the (misfortune) priceless collection of gold artefacts from Crimea at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam that created a huge divide between Russia and the Ukraine even further. Please see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/crimean-gold-artefacts-must-go-back-to-ukraine-dutch-court-rules>.

2 Manifesto of 8 April 1783 *On Accession of the Crimean Peninsula and the Island of Taman Together with All of the Kuban Region Under the Russian Empire*, see Arapov 2000.



Figure 1. Hendrik van Kinsbergen, *The Map of the Crimea with the Black Sea Division*. 1787

When, in 1954, after Nikita Khrushchev offered the Crimean peninsula, together with its principal contents and a suitable endowment, to the Ukraine, Russia's little sister, the consensus among those involved in making the decision to accept or not was that the economic conditions and infrastructure of the Crimea were hideous, but the outdoors were splendid. What mattered were the contents.

The Russians have long nursed a strong affection for the Crimea - as long as they knew the place, as long as they remained in the Crimea. The moment they recognized its much-sought out health benefits, the slow pace, *luftbaden*, outdoor entertainment and its generally relaxed lifestyle, they bumptiously hoped across the great Empire, urged by doctor's considerations and the increasing *dacha* competition. The virtues of simplicity and practicalities were not exactly Russian *forte*. As Stephen Lovell noted in his book on the history of the Russian *dacha*, "One man's tasteful Gothic was another's vulgarity" (Lovell 2003, 39). Peterhof eclecticism was transplanted into the Russian tropics. The craving for pleasure and cultural exchange made some parts of Yalta looked like Pavlovsk and Tzarskoe Selo, with walking promenades along the coast (fig. 2), leafy



Figure 2. *The Promenade of Yalta, Beach Near the Alexander Park*, ca. 1900. Postcard from the series *The Old Yalta*

parks, and vast public squares.³ There were, strictly speaking, no public squares in ancient Crimea. There were courts outside the churches and imperial houses and some wide processional streets.

This was the history of the Russian taste, and when taste had made up its mind there was no arguing with it. Most of the Crimean villas eclectically built between 1850s and 1900 for the upper classes were hideous (fig. 3),⁴

3 Squares have defined urban living since the dawn of democracy, from which they are inseparable. The public square has always been synonymous with a society that acknowledges public life and a life in public, which is to say a society distinguishing the individual from the state.

4 Many art historians remarked that Lev Lagorio (1826-1905) wished to prove himself a faithful student of his master (Aivazovsky), whose art studio he frequented in Feodosia between 1839-42. At the very least, he contrived to compose his landscapes, defined his monuments and created an ambient light effect in such a way as not to shock the artists and connoisseurs who took Claude and Poussain as their models. Among many paintings of Crimea that Lagorio exhibited in Russia was his painting of the *Dacha* (1892), shown at the Russian Academy exhibition of 1892. By 1890s, newspapers carried a healthy sprinkling of advertisements for 'dachas' in the Crimea, a location that was no longer by any means the preserve of pleasure-seeking high society. Several things catch the eye in this account: the similarities of the *dacha* type with the heavily advertised identical projects in the wide Russian press, and the beginning of the standardization in circulating the particular type of taste in the 'dacha-mania' that included a regular garden with a possibility of a fountain in a middle, the view and the isolation.

and those who believed after hundred years they should be saved had to concede its hideousness before arguing for the merits of its contents. The architectural trends that followed in the second half of the twentieth century served by and large, the Soviet *nomenclature*, while an uncontrolled flow of the Russian and Ukrainian *nouveau riches* in the early 2000 acted out of the pure greed illuminated by the spirit of freedom.

The Crimea survived, then, by the skin of its teeth. Crowds kept coming to the peninsula for holiday; it continues to serve as film sets, yoga retreats and the profuse wellness Mecca.

It was an oddity of finding the example of the Gothic revival in the small town of Alupka, but the Vorontzov Palace (fig. 4) is a part of the landscape. A tall slender tower with a silver dome behind the long façade in a centre of the town was the goal of all the visitors' walks. Its light-stone walls rising scarily blank to a high-viewing chamber and Gothic crown that showed above the surrounding garden, serving as an illustration to the grandiose mountain range on the back.

In certain of the smaller rooms of the Palace one comes across the portrait of the Prince Potemkin-Tavrichesky (fig. 5), what appeared to be hasty portrait done by the eminent Russian portraitist, Dmitrii Levitzky (1735-1822) from life during Potemkin's glorifying period as Catherine's *favorit*. Grigory Potemkin (1739-91), then a governor-general of Novorossiysk and all the Southern Russia, points triumphantly at the newly united Russia and the Black Sea fleet as if he is about to unveil the geographic spectacle, outlined against the circle of the sky. It takes a moment to realize that the backdrop is fictitious (*Potemkin's villages*), the faint echo; this is history as commencement address. It was Levitzky's version of Potemkin as a Greek war hero, Achilles, not yet exposed by his vulnerable tendon. Nobody since Levitzky has enjoyed quite that kind of depiction. It shares that art's tendency to breathless hyperbole, but is not without its virtues.

The Palace's first owner, count Mikhail Vorontzov (Timofeev 1980), was the State politician and a Governor-general of the region of Novorossiysk, and he made a point of collecting such unmasking documentations mixed with perfectly respectable stately tastes like Hubert Robert's folly landscapes with no real geography. Count Vorontzov thought it was appropriate for the display in a palatial setting with the revival of the Moorish and Anglican styles. If these interiors bespoke some kind of fantasy – a desire to revive the glories of the Golden Age of the Russian colonialism, it also supposed to be admired, the exquisite style and wit of the age. Such palaces and villas were not just about people who inhabited them, but also about artists who brought them to life.

Let us look first at the way Russian artists grappled with the Crimean natural greatness.



Figure 3. Lev Lagorio, *The Crimean Dacha*. 1892



Figure 4. *The Vorontzov Palace in Alupka*. 1960s



Figure 5. Dmitrii Levitzky, *The Portrait of Prince Grigory Potemkin-Tavrishesky*. 1787

2 Building the New Artistic Criteria Inside the Old School

In 1757 the Imperial Art Academy was opened in St. Petersburg, forcing the Russian art to quick and irreversible adaptation of the European artistic styles. By the end of the eighteenth century, Russia saw her own architects, painters, sculptors, and artists graduating from the Academy and producing work that was in no way inferior to that of their European counterparts. The new lands had been conquered, new cities were built, and new *vedutti* artists were born such as Silvestr Shchedrin, Ivan Aivazovsky, Lev Lagorio (fig. 6), Nikanor and Grigory Chernetzovs. Their works often rendered as engraving and lithographs, went circulating as the calling card of the Russian Orient.

The influence of the nineteenth-century European and especially Italian art on the Russian artists working in Crimea is self-evident. A great number of them lived in Italy, and very wished to leave. We can think of it as a nineteenth-century 'globalization of the art world'. Nikolai V. Gogol' cries in the *Notes on Architecture* ([1834] 1956) over the Italian cityscape that



Figure 6. Lev Lagorio, *The Crimean Landscape*. 1891. From the collection of K.T. Soldatenkov, The Astrakhan Picture Gallery

implied a more imaginative attitude to civil space, something that Crimea, the ‘new Russian Italy’ does not yet acquired. This continuous fascination with Italy is all the more remarkable since many achievements we tend to think of as Crimean were anticipated or matched by other European cultures. The Russian culturologist and art critic Pavel Muratov did produce a companion volume on Italy – titled, inevitably, *The Images of Italy* ([1912] 1924), and one senses that his heart was really in it. Muratov engages the reader with the wider environment by setting a number of compelling comparisons with *sorella maggiore* (Italy) and *sorella giovane* (Crimea). Early nineteenth-century Russian artists had not invented anything new in contemporary artistic technique, as had the Italian or Scandinavian naturalists, nor had they distinguished themselves in composition and imagery, like the German and Austrian Romantics. Thus we see the Crimean landscape painting staging its arrival as an exemplar field on the Russian artistic map. When photography was singled out as the most complete form of documentation, the coloured drawings and swift, atmospheric watercolours were counted essential for capturing the fine details of the wild nature, oriental-

ist architecture, and the exotic local types. The ideal artistic criteria was judged for making the different studies of panoramic details, architectural ornament and naturalistic scenery. The picturesque was born.

3 Crimean ‘picturesque’ and Its Meaning to Us

The notion of the ‘picturesque’ had, by then, an established artistic history in Russia and a settled status as the principal paradigm for Crimean images. If in Russia the aesthetic had enabled a re-enchantment of the domestic rural landscape, outside the Nordic gloom it opened the arms to alternative fantasies of ruggedness, turbulence, and the primeval powers of nature. All of the Crimea was seen as virgin terrain waiting a ‘picturesque’ invocation. Its magnificent mountains, craggy rocks and boulders, torrential waterfalls, and dense foliage, its bountiful supply of ancient ruins and haunting wildernesses, all offered themselves as rich contrasts to the tameness, darkness and general sobriety of the Russian North.

4 Silvestr Shchedrin’s Passions for Italy

Shchedrin was doubtless extreme in his artistic rejection of Russia in favour of Italy, but he was not exceptional in taking a full pleasure in the place. His Italian life was continuously happy and productive; there he spent most or all of his inheritance, and earnings generously. Shchedrin’s death symbolized the demise of early Romanticism and dreamy individualism in Russian painting. The artist’s correspondence is a marvellous source for anyone wishing to gain insight into the happy-go-lucky life of Russian painters in Italy. It describes a zestful life over which premature death never managed to cast shadow. Delighted in carnivals, he loved theatre and embraced the generosity and spontaneity of the Italian lifestyle. The last fifteen years Shchedrin spent in Campania. The city of Naples and the coast of Amalfi (fig. 7) eclipsed his talent; he discovered the bay of Sorrento, the vine-covered verandas with the sea stretching to the distance beyond. His compatriots back in the Crimea have happily adopted these simple subject matters. Their works’ apparent solitude leads not to despair but to a sense of oneness with the universe. Shchedrin, perhaps, was the first Russian landscape artist to grasp the true essence of the southern nature. The sweet and charming themes of his later work led to yet more changes in his technique. He returned to warm tints, his palette became brighter and more intensive, he often made use of contrasts, for example drawing the dark outline of a figure or a rock in the Bay of Naples against a background of evening sky lit up the dramatic sunset.



Figure 7. Selvestr Shchedrin, *View of Amalfi Coast Near Naples*. Late 1820s. SRM

This very lack of interest towards Russia's own paradise in the account of Shchedrin's obsession with Italy, suggests that Italy acquired its own way of life, its own ideology, that it had become a space more than a place. This is undeniably an important stage in the development of the Crimea as a cultural space for the Russian artists: the moment when it floats away from a set of physical coordinates and comes to be associated with its own set of practice and values. These were by no means the only possible practices and values: many Russian artists required visual excitement and social stimulation next to their professional productivity, and in the middle of the nineteenth century Crimea was appearing to provide them.

5 Maxim Vorobyev's *Les Enfants du paradis*

The blending of styles is especially noticeable in the work of Maxim Vorobyev, motivated in part by very real growing eclectic academic fold of Romanticism and Classicism. By the early 1830s, he was at the height of his artistic and teaching powers, following in the footsteps of Silvestr Shchedrin ten years later. As a Romantic and traveller, Vorobyev was attracted by the Orient (*Jerusalem at Night in the 1830s*). His fascination with antiquities comes natural. Another notable example of this period is the quiet pastoral Crimean view, such as *The Old Feodosia* (1851). This emphasis on national and ethnic character overshadows more structural factors that surely influenced Vorobyev's development as a teacher of landscape painting at the Russian Art Academy. All major landscape artists from the period between 1830 and 1860 studied under him, including Ivan

Aivazovsky (1817-1900), whose career spans almost the entire century.⁵ Three other pupils of Vorobyev, the brothers Grigorii and Nikanor Chernetzov and Mkhail Lebedev, had little in common either with their teacher or with Aivazovsky. The Chernetzovs depicted diligently the Crimean nature, with a tendency to imitate Biedermeier and Neo-Classicism and their delicate simplicity and neatness place them nearer to the draughtsman circle.

Mikhail Lebedev (1811-37) was a very talented landscape painter whose tragic death at the age of 26 cut his career short. After taking Vorobyev's classes at the Academy in the 1830s, he went to Italy on a scholarship. Lebedev's eyes fixed firmly upon the pure, the good, and the beautiful, rephrasing the technique of Shchedrin. But unlike him, Lebedev is more energetic and capable, without an ambivalence of Shchedrin. The short period Lebedev spent in Italy, he briskly acquired the techniques of *plein air* painting, thereby freeing himself from the limitations of the old, stylized treatment of colour and light, and exploring with growing confidence the relationship between the object and its surroundings, avoiding panoramas and vistas.

6 Aivazovsky's Unsettling Epic

Ovanes (Ivan) Aivazovsky was born into the family of a merchant Gevorg (and Ripsime) Gaivazovsky on 17 July 1817, and his birth is registered in the records of the Armenian Church in the coastal city of Feodosia in Eastern Crimea. Aivazovsky's ancestors originated from Armenia and in the eighteenth century moved from Turkish Armenia to Galicia. In 1833 Ovanes enrolled in the academic class of Vorobyev and Villevalde at public expense. As early as 1834 he made a copy of Silvestr Shchedrin's *View of Amalfi near Naples*, revealing his life-long admiration for Turner. He quickly mastered the technique from copying again and again the waves, foam, crests and clouds. When the Academy decided to send him to Crimea for two years, Aivazovsky settled to paint landscapes of the seaside cities like Yalta, his native Feodosia (*The Old Feodosia*), Sevastopol' and Kerch.

For all his novelty, he is a strangely old-fashioned artist. The treatment of the Crimean seascape often ignores differences of genre and rates of survival. It is their shadows – as if he was painting the sea life by memory – that hover behind Aivazovsky's mental navigations, in all their inquisitive rivalry and pleasure-loving independence. *The Landing at Sabashi* is an exception; it was bought by Nicolas I for the Winter palace collection, but not the *View of Kerch from the Ancient Fortifications of Mirmeky* or *Moonlit Night on the Crimea. Gurzuf*. By the end of summer

5 Popularity of Aivazovsky stretches into the twenty-first century: as I write, the large retrospective of his work just finished in Moscow and is now enjoying the run in St Petersburg State Russian Museum.

1839, Aivazovsky came back to St. Petersburg to graduate with the first class honour, and a year later together with his classmate Vasily Sternberg left for Rome. In Venice he was introduced to Nikolai Gogol' and paid a visit to his brother Gabriel (Sarkis) in the island of St Lazarus (fig. 8). By accepting the monastic life in the Armenian quarters of Venice, Sarkis had chosen never to return home. After his first visit, Aivazovsky took many more pilgrimages to San Lazarus to see his brother, but also Lord Byron, who came there to study the Armenian language. Byron set for Aivazovsky many times (fig. 9) on the island.

In the exhibition of 1854 he displayed the siege of Sevastopol next to other works dedicated to the two crucial episodes during the battle of Sinop. Before opening the show, he seeks Admiral P. Nakhimov's advise on the historical correctness of his painting.

Aivazovsky did many 'peaceful' paintings such as the *Moonlit Night near Naples*, *Sunset in Feodosia*, *View of Venice from the Lido*, *View of Odessa*, yet he could not abstain from painting the Crimean war: *Storm over Yevpatoria* and *Balaklava on 2 November, 1855*. The latter shows the English ships torn from their anchors by the stormy weather and smashed against the cliffs.

The marriage of Crimea and Italy haunted Aivazovsky for a long time, best seen inside the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Feodosia (1873). For the church he made a gigantic quartet (*Walking on the Waters*, *Rainbow*, *The Bay of Naples*, *Moonlight Night on the Black Sea* and *Storm at the Black Sea*), now dismantled. Speaking of his love for Italy and of nurturing his carrier as a marine artist, it was Sorrento where he developed a curious technique of working only for a short time outside, then finalizing the picture in his studio. Such technique, he said, left much room for improvisation.

Aivazovsky died in Feodosia on 19 April 1900; the entire city was present at the funeral as a token of gratitude to the artist who opened a fine arts school with his own money, was founder of the Chimmerian Art School, and initiated the construction of a railroad line to Feodosia from Dzhanka (completed in 1892). His stiff experimentations with panoramas, terrestrial and marine scenes, left, nevertheless, a new pictorial language that would sustain, consciously or not, the younger generation of the Crimean artists in the 1870s and 1880s. In seeking to capture sensation and the experience of being present through the 'forces of nature'⁶ Aivazovsky allies himself with the most forward-thinking practitioners of the Crimean painters.

6 Those familiar with the poem *Farewell to the Sea* by Alexander Pushkin, know the "colourful reflections of light on water", an inexhaustible leitmotif of Aivazovsky's work.



Figure 8. *The Bird-eye View of the Island of San Lazarus*. Contemporary photograph



Figure 9. Ivan Aivazovsky, *Lord Byron Visiting Mkhitarists on the Island of San Lazarus in Venice*. 1899



Figure 10. Fedor Vasiliev, *The Crimean Mountains in a Winter*, 1871-1873, STG

7 The Art of Quietness: Fedor Vasiliev

The spell that Crimea cast over the modern Russian imagination finds no better expression than in two paintings of Fedor Vasiliev (1850-73), *In the Crimea, After the rain* and *The Crimean Mountains in Winter* of 1873 (fig. 10). They have a rich literature of their own (see Churak 1996) and both belong to the fleeting romance of the artist with the Crimea. *In the Crimea, after the Rain* has a fascinating entry showing how the *Peredvizhnik* follower wove his magical vision out of daily communication with the Crimean nature. Vasiliev was twenty-three when he painted the Crimean Mountains in winter, two months before he died of tuberculosis. He already thought of himself as an old man, an impotent in a land of rampant sexuality, a Northern flower in the Wild Southern flora. Vasiliev found his image of the freeing of the purified soul in a journey, which he himself never took, to other important historical places of the Crimea, where he would be gathered into the pantheon of eternity, facing an ageless beauty of the Crimean embroidery of the bays, havens and rocks. Despite having the appearance of being painted quickly, Vasiliev's canvases were notoriously skilled and deliberate in their gestation. The artist required the presence of nature in his works at all time, and often worked *en plein air*.

Crimean landscape painting in the age of Pushkin, Gogol', Tolstoy and even Chekhov is also an example of the discrepancy between the outsider's and the insider's point of view on art. In Soviet Russia, these landscape artists became avatars of Socialist Realism, their work industrially initiated and reproduced to hang on the walls of local Party Committee halls,

Palaces of Culture and ethnographical museums; to 'people' the consciousness of the Anton with patriotic images. The single, Crimean cypress tree towering over the Aiu-Dag valley in Feodor Vasyliiev's *Mountains and the Sea*, 1872, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg - symbol of Crimea's beauty - was serialized as a holiday postcard. Such images moved me as a Russian girl on holiday in the Crimean paradise, but the nostalgia they evoke also induces fear and trembling in anyone who has grown up in a country where every office and institution of the tyrannical state was visually associated with this kind of kitsch.

At the time of presenting this paper, a new chapter of nostalgia took place at the Stroganoff Palace in St. Petersburg. The photographic exhibition featured about seventy albumen prints of the Crimean peninsula as it was between 1880 until about 1910, commemorating the dramatic Crimean landscapes as fertile ground for photography. The photographic images of nature had a clear pastiche for romantic painting. The hand of Aivazovsky and Vasiliev betrayed their results. When things are 'staged' and 'put into the picture', whether in photos, literature or films, or, for example, in the arrangement of furniture and accessories, this is often aimed at the conscious or unconscious self-stylization and representation of the subject.

The search for the sublime in the midst of misery is, indeed, one of the major recurring motifs in Russian artistic culture, and the Crimea consumes and sublimates the gloom into glory. Its exoticism of the landscape, its scale, relief, vistas and vedutti, the sun struck mountain panoramas over Kerch and Balaklava, the promenade of Yalta, the thousand mile skies over prodigious gorges and glittering seawaters, have always been captivating. But these descriptions could equally apply to the Caspar-David Friedrich's *Prussian forests*, Karl Briullov's *Sunlit terraces of Rome*, Shchedrin's *Il tramonto napoletano*. Awesomeness in natural beauty is a common denominator. It is the attitude to lower life and ugliness that differs from country to country.

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