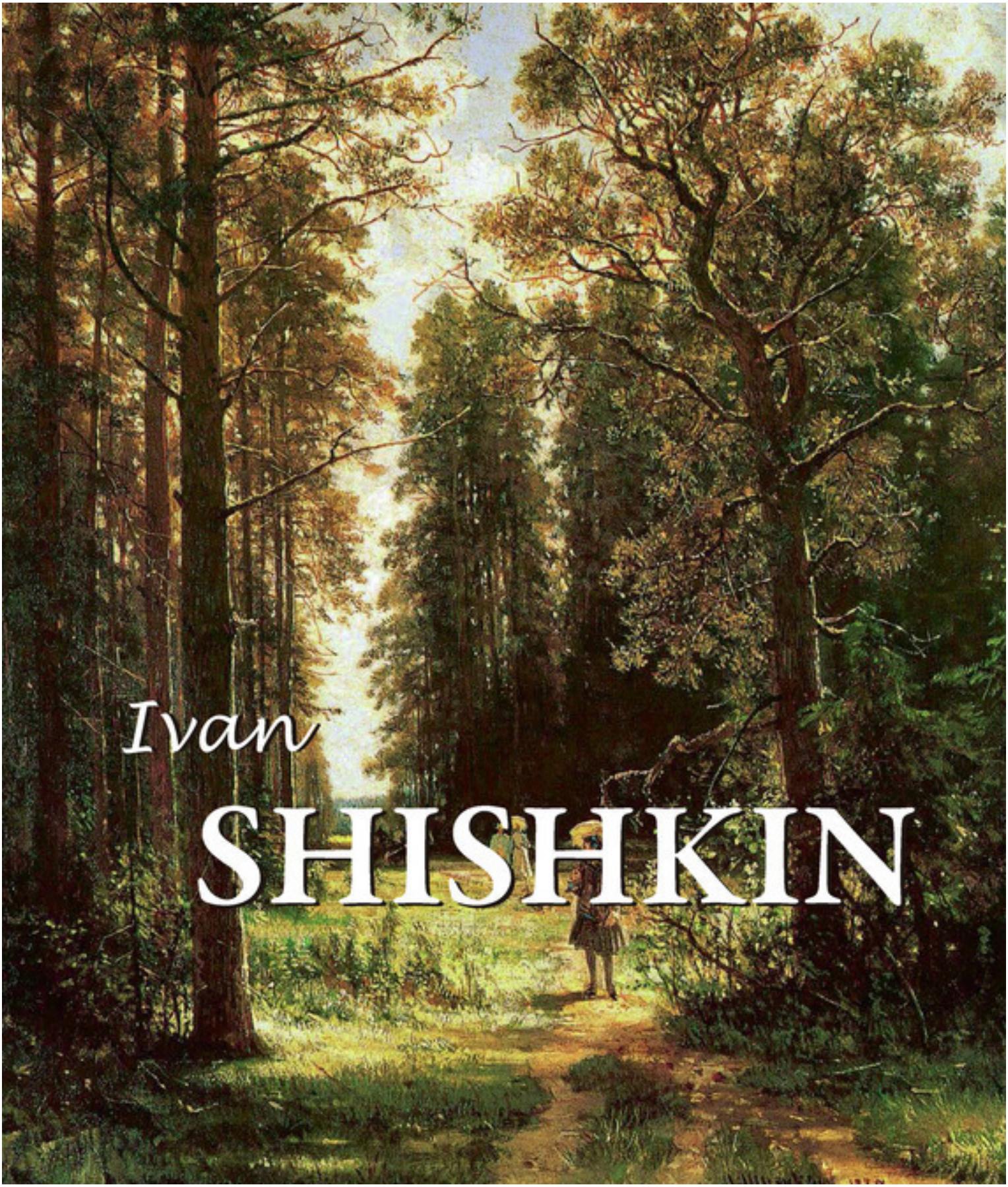
Ivan
SHISHKIN

Russian countryside is some of the world's most lovely, from the celebrated explosions of wild flowers that fill its forests in the spring, to the icy winter tundra that defeated the advances of Napoleon and Hitler, and provided the backdrop for the drama of many of Russian literature's celebrated scenes. And no one immortalized it better than Ivan Shishkin (1832-1898), a Russian landscape painter. In this comprehensive work of scholarship, Irina Shuvalova and Victoria Charles make a thorough examination of Shishkin's work.

Содержание

Victoria Charles and Irina Shuvalova
Ivan Shishkin

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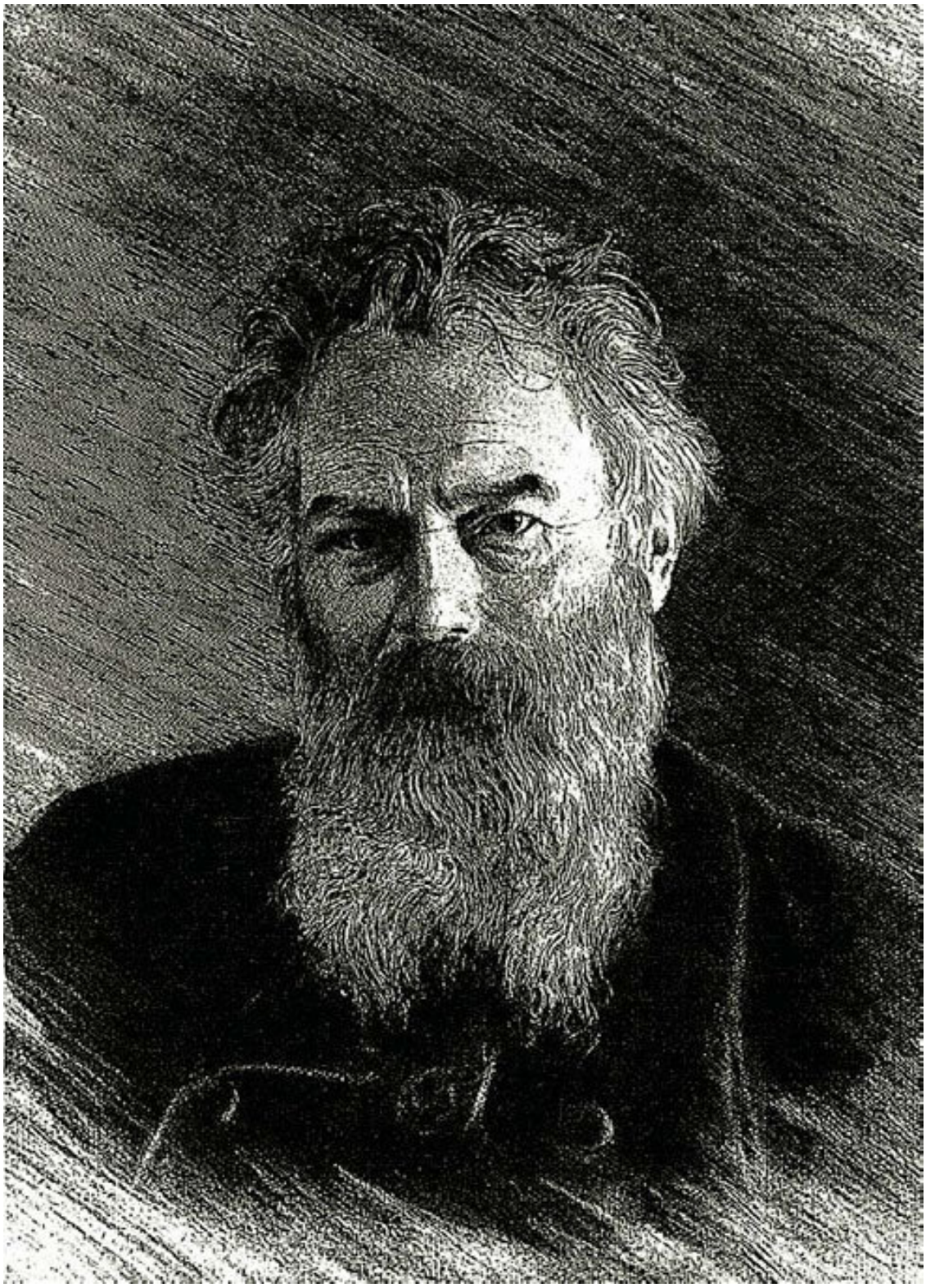
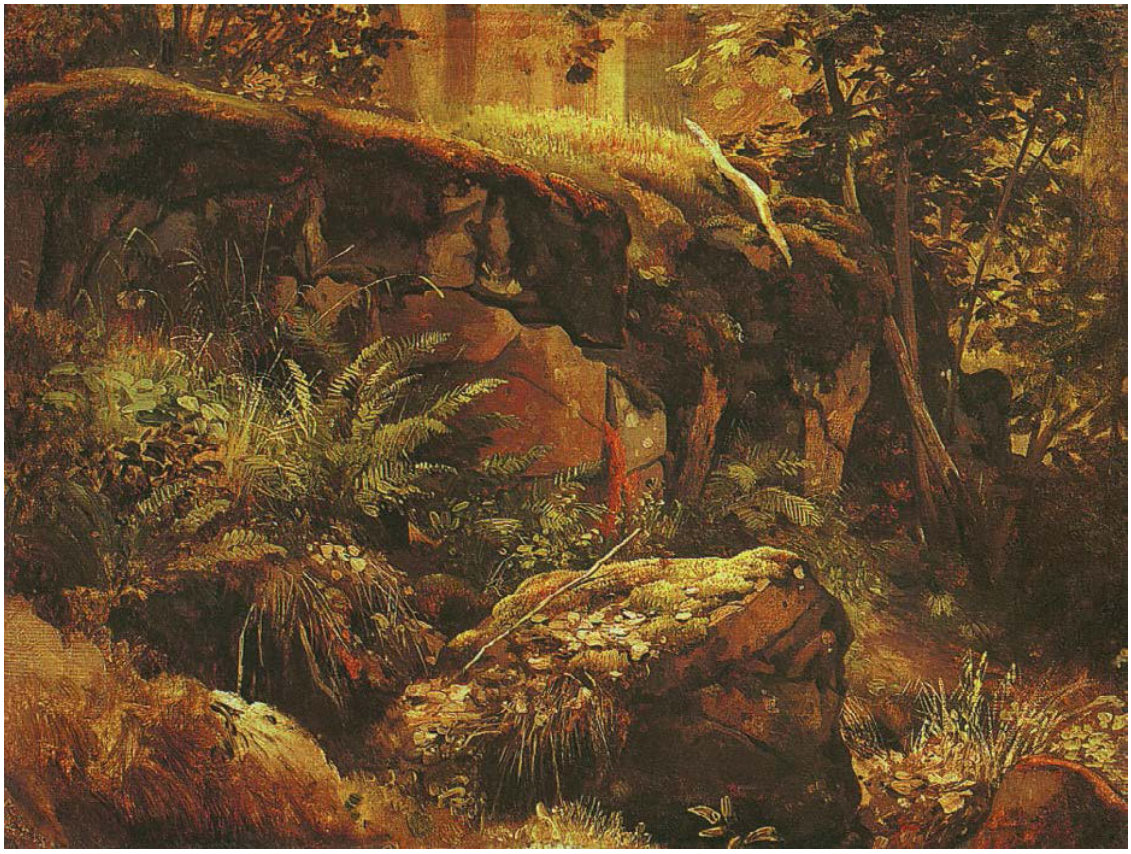


Self-Portrait, 1886.
Etching, 24 × 17 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Ivan Shishkin and Russian Landscape Painting



Boulders in a Forest. Valaam (study), c. 1858.
Oil on canvas, 32 × 43 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

From the 18th Century to the 1860s

It was only in the last quarter of the 18th century and during the first part of the 19th century that landscape painting in Russia emerged as a separate genre. Artists such as Fyodor Alexeyev (1753–1824), Fyodor Matveyev (1758–1826), Maxim Vorobiev (1787–1855), and Sylvester Shchedrin (1791–1830) produced masterpieces of landscape painting, although their work was heavily influenced by the Latin tradition – by painters such as Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, and Canaletto – it is in the work of Venetsianov and his followers (for example, in his *Summer: Harvest Time* and *Spring: Ploughing)* that landscape with a truly Russian character makes its first appearance.

Two of Venetsianov's most promising pupils were Nikifor Krylov (1802–1831) and Grigory Soroka (1823–1864). Despite the brief span of their working lives, both of these artists were to have a considerable influence on the painters who came after them. The countryside in Kryiov's best-known picture, *Winter Landscape* (1827), is unmistakably Russian, as are the people that enliven it. In order to paint the scene realistically, he had a simple wooden studio erected, looking out over the snow-covered plain to the woodlands visible in the distance. Krylov's artistic career had barely begun when, at the age of twenty-nine, he succumbed to cholera. Only a small number of his works have survived.

Soroka died in even more tragic circumstances. He was one of the serfs belonging to a landowner named Miliukov whose estate, Ostrovki, was close to Venetsianov's. Conscious of Soroka's talent, Venetsianov tried to persuade Miliukov to set the young painter free, but without success. (True to his humanitarian ideals, Venetsianov pleaded for the freedom of other talented serf artists and in some cases purchased their liberty himself.) Later, in 1864, Soroka was arrested for his part in local agitation for land reforms and sentenced to be flogged. Before the punishment could be carried out, he committed suicide. One of his most representative paintings is *Fishermen: View of Lake Moldino* (late 1840s), which is remarkable for the way it captures the silence and stillness of the lake.

For a period of thirty or forty years most of the leading Russian landscape painters were taught by Maxim Vorobiev, who became a teacher at the Academy in 1815 and continued to teach there – except for long trips abroad, including an extended stay in Italy – almost up to the time of his death. Vorobiev and Sylvester Shchedrin were chiefly responsible for introducing the spirit of Romanticism into Russian landscape painting, while remaining faithful to the principles of classical art. Especially during the last decade of his life, Shchedrin favoured dramatic settings. Vorobiev went through a phase in which he was attracted by landscapes shrouded in mist or lashed by storms, and both he and Shchedrin delighted in Romantic sunsets and moonlit scenes.

View near St Petersburg, 1853.
Oil on canvas, 66.5 × 96 cm.
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

View of Valaam Island. Kukko, 1859–1860.

Oil on canvas, 69 × 87.1 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Among Vorobiev's most talented pupils were Mikhaïl Lebedev (1811–1837) – whose landscapes are less overtly Romantic than either Vorobiev's or Shchedrin's – and Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900), one of the most popular scenic painters of his time and certainly the most prolific. Indeed, those who reach such fame in their lifetime are rare. Barely finished with his studies, his name was already circulating throughout Russia. His learning years were situated, in effect, at a critical time. If academic rules were still in force, Romanticism was growing and each and everyone had Karl Briullov's fabulous *The Last Day of Pompeii* on their minds. This painting had a great effect on Aivazovsky's inspiration. He was further taught by Vorobiov, whose teaching was influenced by the Romantic spirit. Aivazovsky remained faithful to this movement all his life, even though he oriented his work towards the realist genre. In October 1837, he finished his studies at the Academy and received a gold medal, synonymous with a trip to foreign countries at the cost of the Academy. But Aivazovsky's gifts were such that the Council made an unusual decision: he was to spend two summers in the Crimean painting views of southern towns, present them to the Academy, and, after that, leave for Italy. The echo of the success of his Italian exhibitions was even heard in Russia. The *Khoudojestvennaïa Gazeta* wrote

> "In Rome, Aivazovsky's paintings presented at the art exhibition won first prize. *Neapolitan Night, Chaos*… made such an impression in the capital of fine arts that aristocratic salons, public gatherings, and painters' studios resound with the glory of the new Russian landscape artist. Newspapers dedicate laudatory lines to him and everyone says and writes that before Aivazovsky no one had shown light, water, and air with such realism and life. Pope Gregory XVI bought *Chaos* and hung it in the Vatican where only paintings by world-famous painters have the honour of hanging."

Whilst in Paris, he received the gold medal of the Council of the Academy of Paris and was made Knight of the Legion of Honour in 1857!

Influenced to some extent by J. M. W. Turner, he created magnificent seascapes, such as *Moonlit Night in the Crimea, View of the Sea and Mountains at Sunset*, and *The Creation of the World*. One of Aivazovsky's most famous works, *The Ninth Wave* (1850), owes its title to the superstition among Russian sailors that in any sequence of waves, the ninth is the most violent. Like many of his paintings, it bears the imprint of Romanticism: the sea and sky convey the power and grandeur of nature, whilst in the foreground, the survivors of a shipwreck embody human hopes and fears. Although the sea is the dominant theme in the majority of the 6,000 paintings that Aivazovsky produced, he also painted views of the coast and countryside, both in Russia (especially in the Ukraine and Crimea) and during travels abroad.

The enthusiasm for all things French that had been so prevalent in Russia during the 18th century diminished following the Napoleonic Wars – which is one reason that Russian painters, in common with European artists and writers generally, began to transfer their allegiance to Italy.

An Old House on the Edge of a Pond, 1860s.
Sepia on paper, 33 × 26.5 cm.
Kiev National Museum of Russian Art, Kiev.

Beech Forest in Switzerland, 1863.
Oil on canvas, 51 × 61 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

View in the Vicinity of Düsseldorf, 1865.
Oil on canvas, 105.9 × 150.8 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Herd in the Forest, 1864.

Oil on canvas, 105 × 140 cm.
Picture Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan.

This trend was reinforced by the Academy's veneration of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, and also by the first stirrings of the Romantic movement. Fyodor Matveyev painted little else besides Italian architecture and landscapes. Both Sylvester Shchedrin (who spent the last twelve years of his life in Italy) and Mikhaïl Lebedev delighted in idyllic fishing scenes and tableaux of Italian peasant life. Aivazovsky painted views of Venice and Naples (many of them bathed in moonlight), and Fyodor Alexeyev actually became known as "the Russian Canaletto".

Sylvester Shchedrin entered the Academy of the Arts in Saint Petersburg in the landscape department. He received the gold medal to crown his graduation. The Academy offered him a trip abroad. He left for Italy, but only in 1818, because of the Neapolitan invasion. The most famous work of this period is undoubtedly *New Rome, the Castle of the Holy Angel*. Indeed, this painting was a great success and Shchedrin had to fill several orders and made several replicas of the painting from different angles. He lived in Rome and then in Naples. Orders were abundant and Italy was a constant source of inspiration. He worked outdoors, drawing nature, bays, hills, villages, fishermen, etc. Among his works, we can point out *View of Serrento* (1826) and *Terrace on a Seashore* (1828). He liked drawing hillsides of vineyards overlooking the sea. His numerous terraces were very well received as, for him, they represented the harmony between people's lives and nature. After the 1820s, he began drawing night landscapes filled with a tone of anxiety. As he had fallen ill, this certainly explains the change. Most of his works belong to private collectors throughout the world.

During the first half of the 19th century a steady stream of Russian painters travelled to Italy or took up residence there – among them the Chernetsov brothers (who also travelled to Egypt, Turkey, and Palestine) and such influential painters as Briullov, Kiprensky, and Alexander Ivanov, whose *Appian Way at Sunset* and *Water and Stones near Pallazzuolo* have an almost Pre-Raphaelite quality. In 1846, Nestor Kukolnik – a fashionable poet and aesthete whose portrait was painted by Briullov – declared that Russian painting had virtually become a "continuation of the Italian school".

The architecture of their own country also caught the imagination of Russian painters. Both Fyodor Alexeyev and Vorobiev (who had been one of Alexeyev's pupils) produced numerous paintings of the buildings, streets, and squares of Saint Petersburg and Moscow. So did Semion Shchedrin (1745–1804), Sylvester's uncle. Professor of landscape painting at the Academy from 1776 until his death, he painted charming, sensitive views of the parks and gardens of the Imperial residences near Saint Petersburg – such as *Stone Bridge at Gatchina*, one of a series of decorative panels that he produced between 1799 and 1801.

Alexeyev's images of the city created by Peter the Great are much more than topographical records. They are executed with a harmony and appreciation of beauty that became a mark of Russian landscape painting throughout the 19th century.

Landscape with a Hunter. Valaam Island, 1867.
Oil on canvas, 36.5 × 60 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

The skilful handling of complicated effects of chiaroscuro, both in terms of brushwork and perspective, coupled with the wealth of observation of city life and the detail of the buildings, give his work enduring artistic and historical value.

Andreï Martynov (1768–1826) and Stepan Galaktionov (1778–1854) were nicknamed "the poets of Saint Petersburg". Martynov, who was a pupil of Semion Shchedrin, painted atmospheric views of the avenues of elegant houses, the gardens of Monplaisir, the quays along the Neva lined by palaces and the Smolny Convent, seen from a distance, dissolving into the evening sky. Like Vorobiev and Aivazovsky, he managed to travel widely, and painted in Siberia, Mongolia, and China. Galaktionov (another of Semion Shchedrin's pupils) was a lithographer and engraver as well as a painter, which is reflected in the careful, detailed character of his work.

From the 1860s to the 1890s

With the Itinerants, the status of landscape painting was greatly enhanced. Even artists like Vasily Perov (1833–1882), who were primarily concerned with people rather than landscape, regarded the countryside as something more than a convenient background for portraits and genre paintings. Perov's *The Last Tavern at the City Gates*, painted in 1868, is enormously evocative, with its wintry light and the snow-covered road stretching into the distance. Three years later, Fyodor Vassilyev's *The Thaw* and Alexeï Savrasov's *The Rooks Have Returned* were among the highlights of the Itinerants' first exhibition. These three paintings in effect mark the watershed between academic Romanticism and a more realistic representation of nature.

Ivan Shishkin and Alexander Guinet in a Studio on Valaam Island (study), 1860.
Oil on paper, 29 × 36.5 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

A mild-mannered and extraordinarily patient teacher, Savrasov exerted a far-reaching influence on Russian landscape painting. From 1857 to 1882 he was in charge of the landscape studio at the Moscow College of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, where Levitan, Korovin, and Nesterov were among his pupils. *The Rooks Have Returned* brilliantly evokes the reawakening of the Russian countryside after the winter.

Ivan Shishkin was dubbed the "Tsar of the Forest" by his contemporaries. And rightly so. From his earliest years, he was fascinated by the conifers around his house. After his studies, and with the benediction of his father, who always encouraged him in this path, he left for Moscow in 1952 to study painting. An exhibition of Aivazovsky's seascapes made a profound impression on him. At the time, realism was highly regarded and academic rules were less strict, which allowed

Shishkin to freely develop his deepest inclinations. He was taught by Mokritsky, who was under the influence of Briullov and Venetsianov himself. He encouraged Shishkin in the direction that was his; namely, landscape and nature. Very soon, he asked himself why inspiration was sought in Italian nature, as by Shchedrin and Lebedev, and not in Russian nature. He then left the Academy of Moscow for the Academy of Saint Petersburg in 1856.

The most influential painters there at the time were Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov, for whom painting was meant to be not only a mirror of the surrounding world but a means to transform it. Another important aspect of teaching was the emulation of western painters, especially the Swiss landscape artist Alexandre Calame, who was very popular at the time. Calame influenced many Russian painters, amongst whom Shishkin, who, however, retained a personal touch. At first he often used pencil. A silver medal rewarded his drawings in 1857, shortly thereafter, in 1860, followed by the gold. Shishkin was recognised for the finesse and extreme precision of his strokes. At this time, he was also trying his hand at *eau-forte* and lithography.

Tree Felling, 1867.
Oil on canvas, 122 × 194 cm.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

His drawings alone represent a large part of his work. The title of academician was given to him in 1865 thanks to his painting *View near Dusseldorf*. His return to Russia (he had spent three years abroad) was a real joy and a source of inspiration for him. He also made friends with many painters, including Ilya Repin. Speaking of his friend, Repin declared:

> "The loudest voice was Shishkin's, he impressed everyone with his youth and his strength, which made him resemble a young forest in his vigorous health, his wolfish appetite, and his beautiful Russian. Numerous and remarkable drawings were born during these evenings. Sometimes, spectators standing behind him uttered terrified 'Ohs!' and 'Ahs!' upon seeing him, with his thick, rough, cart-driver's hands, erase what he had just so brilliantly drawn whereas, on the contrary, the drawing became as if by miracle more and more refined."

In 1870, he was among the founders of the Society for Itinerant Art Exhibitions, with its realist tendency.

In 1872, his painting *Conifers* marked a new phase in the painter's artistic evolution. Nothing disturbs the calm of this scene. All the details are present: the bear, the flying bird, the pines that are all different from one another. This is thus, once again, a very realistic scene but, at the same time, a new energy emanates from this painting, expressing a harmony that Shishkin had not reached up to that point. This painting was an immense success. The painter became friends with Kramskoi, leader of the Society. With remarkable perception, he corrected Shishkin's awkwardness. Together, they very often went off to make sketches from nature.

However, it was during the 1880s that the artist reached the summit of his art. *Pine Forest* (1885) or *After the Storm* (1888) reflects great artistic liberty. Henceforth, the artist alternated light and dark rays, which allowed him to better translate space and to render the landscape to appear more energetic and dynamic. He was increasingly preoccupied with the representation of light, which was previously not the case. His study *Sunlit Pines* (1886) reveals shadows and reflections that are penetrated by light. During those years, his strokes became supple, dynamic, alert to reflected light while the crosshatching, for its part, was more sensitive and varied.

The technical virtuosity and poetic majesty of his painting speak for themselves. Works such as *Winter* (1890) are unrivalled in the way they convey the texture of snow, whilst his summer landscapes such as *Rye and Oak Grove* powerfully express the beauty and colours of the Russian countryside. *Morning in a Pine Wood,* unforgettable for its bears, and *The Forest of Countess Mordvinova* are among the hundreds of paintings by him that capture the magic of the forest and the character of the trees. Indeed, *Morning in a Pine Wood* describes the awakening of the forest, the sun coming up, the fog slowly lifting; the foreground is in focus whereas the trees that are further away have fuzzy contours. The sliding light of the sun which chases the mist away little by little bestows great poetry on this magnificent piece of work. The lyricism of this waking forest is like the signature of Shishkin's immense maturity with respect to nature.

Tevtoburgsky Forest, 1865.
Oil on canvas, 67 × 95 cm.

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Noon. Suburbs of Moscow. Bratsevo, 1866.
Oil on canvas, 65 × 59 cm.
The Kustodiev Picture Gallery, Astrakhan.

Midday. Countryside near Moscow, 1869.
Oil on canvas, 111.2 × 80.4 cm.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

At the Church Fence. Valaam Island, 1867.
Oil on canvas, 92 × 138 cm.
Private collection, St Petersburg.

Shishkin died as he was starting work on a new painting, *The Kingdom of the Forest*, on 20th March 1898, leaving behind him an immense artistic legacy.

During the 1870s, the art of Arkhip Kuindzhi underwent an abrupt transformation. Many of the pictures that he painted in the early and mid-1870s – such as *The Forgotten Village* and *The Pack-Ox Road in Mariupol* – have muted tones, reflecting the harshness of life in rural Russia. Then Kuindzhi began to experiment with a completely different tonal range, resulting in the marvellously luminous quality of paintings such as *After the Rain* and the brightness of ones like *The Birch Grove*, both of which date from 1879.

Enthralled by Kuindzhi's new style, Repin declared that "the illusion of light was his God" and no other artist had "equalled the miraculous success of his paintings". However, there were artists who tried to emulate Kuindzhi's "lunar colours", and ones who made similar use of dramatic light effects, such as Nikolaï Dubovskoi who painted *The Calm Before the Storm* in 1890.

Vassily Polenov was also a master of pleasing light effects, amply demonstrated by his painting *Overgrown Pond*, a tranquil Moscow backyard, more farmyard than courtyard, that helped to establish a vogue for landscape paintings with prominent genre elements and nuances of light and shade. An enthusiastic advocate of *plein-air* painting, he succeeded Savrasov as head of the landscape studio at the Moscow College of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture.

One of the greatest and best-known landscape painters among the Itinerants, Isaac Levitan, had the advantage of studying under both Savrasov and Polenov. Although his art is perhaps less epic than Shishkin's, his style and subject matter are more varied – perhaps surprisingly, since he died at a comparatively early age. Levitan, like Shishkin, was a supreme master of the use of colour, composition, and light and shade. All the seasons of the year, the different times of day, and the infinite variety of nature figure in Levitan's canvases. But, unlike Shishkin, who had a preference

for summer landscapes, Levitan preferred the fresh colours of spring and the muted cadences of autumn. When he painted summer scenes, such as *Secluded Monastery*, he preferred to work in the evening, when the light was softer, or even at dusk. He also joined the Society of Itinerant Exhibitions. He was a contemporary of Nesterov, Korovin, Stepaniv, Bakcheev, and Arkhipov. He was friends with Ostroukhov and Serov.

Walk in the Forest, 1869.
Oil on canvas, 34.3 × 43.3 cm.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Summing up Levitan's mature work, Chekhov (who was a friend) said, "Nobody before him achieved such astonishing simplicity and clarity of purpose… and I don't know whether anyone after him will ever achieve the same." Levitan's paintings are in effect a hymn to nature. *Autumn Day: Solniki* and *Summer Evening: Fence* both express the vastness and emptiness of parts of Russia. *The Vladimirka Road* is a typical Russian plain that stretches out on the canvas and disappears in the distance. The sky is heavy; grey and cloudy, like a lid that weighs on the entire tract of land, crossed by a road alongside of which run paths made by many feet. If the painting is marked by a certain feeling of sadness, an impression of solemnity also emanates from this empty space. The silhouette placed in the painting accentuates the feeling of solitude even further. On the subject of the road, Levitan said (remarks later recounted by the painter Kouvchinnikova), "It's the Vladimirka road, the Vladimirka along which convoys of countless unhappy souls with chained feet formerly made their way toward the prisons of Siberia." Further, *Evening Bells* is a delightful example of his handling of dappled light.

He left a permanent mark on Russian painting by bringing to it the feeling of profound typically Levitanian poetry characteristic of Russian nature. This principle came in part from

Savrassov because he believed that the particular merit of this artist was to have tried to "reveal in the most simple and ordinary things, the intimate, troubling, and often sad traits that characterise Russian landscapes and act so strongly on the spirit." (*Masters of Art Speak of Art*, Vol. 7, Moscow, 1970, p. 198) Indeed, what he appreciated most about this master was his "lyricism and infinite love of his native country".

Levitan's art is characterised by the breadth of feeling expressed by his palette through various landscapes. Extolling the simplicity of aestheticism before all else, which only a great master has the capacity to succeed in, his paintings were first and foremost a simplification of shape and colour, whilst preserving the most expressiveness and realism possible.

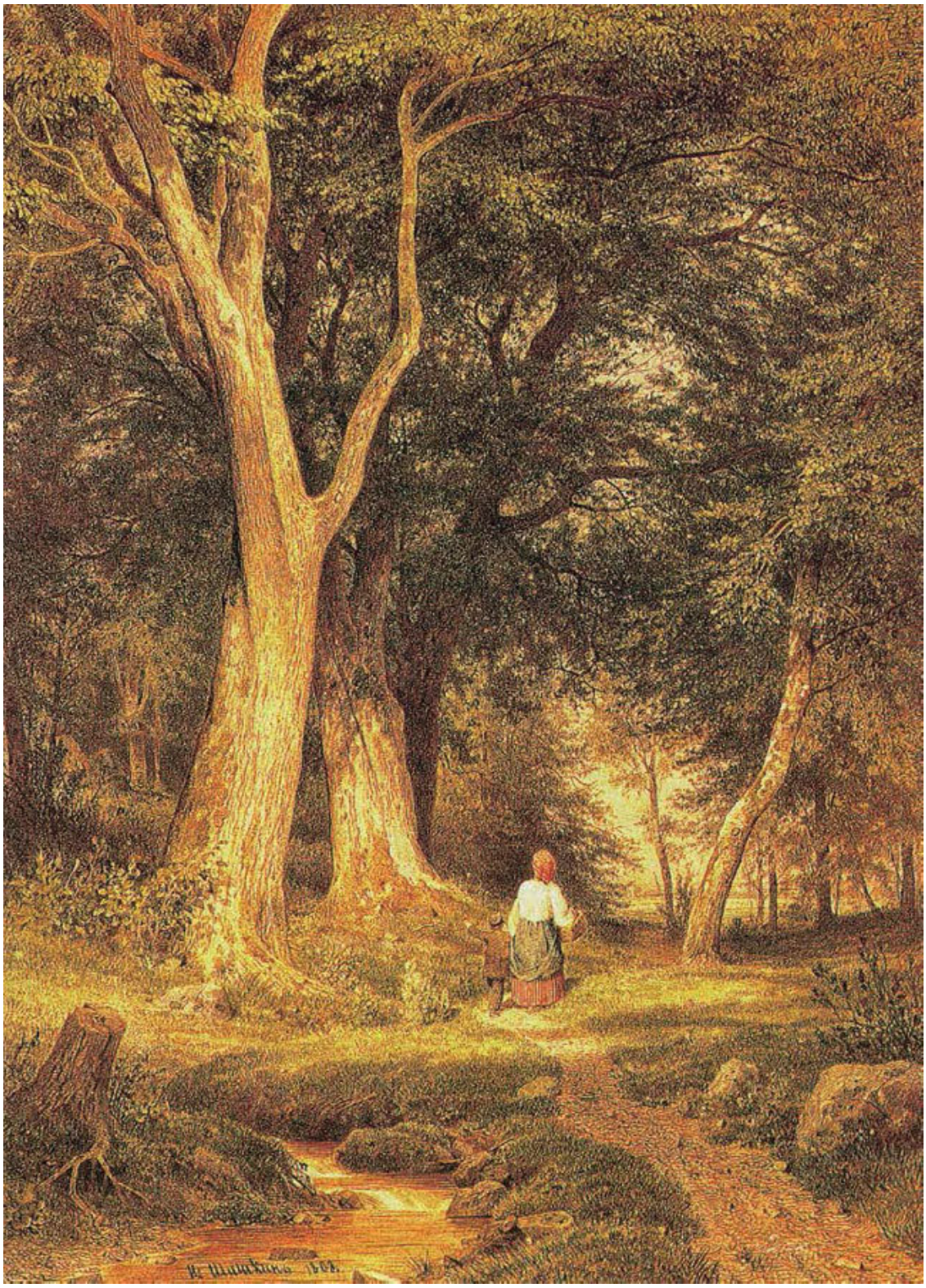
From the 1890s to the Post-Revolutionary Period

With its championing of *plein air* techniques, Impressionism inevitably had a considerable impact on Russian landscape painting; one of the foremost Russian Impressionists was Grabar, whose favourite genre was landscape. In particular, he liked to paint sun and shadows on snow or the contrast between wintry skies and frosted trees, as in *February Azure*. Other snow scenes that are remarkable for their handling of light and colour include Serov's *Colts at a Watering Place*, which makes brilliant use of pastel to capture the frosty sunset, and Surikov's *Zubovsky Boulevard in Winter*, where the wintry effect is achieved through the pervasive use of blacks, blues, and browns.

The style and mood of *Blue Spring* by Vassily Baksheyev, an almost exact contemporary of Grabar, are reminiscent of the spring landscapes painted by Savrasov, who was one of his teachers. Baksheyev devoted his energies almost entirely to landscape painting from the early stages of his career, and the beauty of slender birches seen against a clear spring sky was a theme that he returned to again and again.

Forest Stream, 1870.
Oil on canvas, 79 × 112 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Mushroom Hunting, 1870.
Oil on canvas, 66.5 × 55.5 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.



Woman with a Boy in the Forest, 1868.
Pen and ink with watercolour on paper, varnished, 43.8 × 31.6 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Forest Landscape with Herons, 1870.
Oil on canvas, 79 × 112 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

In common with other painters who belonged to the Union of Russian Artists, Konstantin Yuon was attracted by the landscape of Old Russia, particularly by the ancient towns, with their onion-domed churches, monasteries, and bustling markets. His urban landscapes, such as *A Sunny Spring Day in Seigiev Posad* – are often enlivened by human activity and the movement of birds or animals. After the Revolution, he produced landscapes such as his famous *Industrial Moscow Morning* (1949), which have a poetic quality expressing the dynamism of industry and the joy of work.

Another of the painters associated with the Union of Russian Artists – and also with the Blue Rose group – was Nikolaï Krymov, who played an important role as a teacher of landscape painting in the post-Revolutionary period. Before the Revolution, he experimented with a variety of styles, including a Primitivist phase that resulted in landscapes such as *Windy Day*, notable for a pictorial quality and colour range inspired by Russian folk art.

Both landscape and folk art were important to Chagall and Kandinsky. The lovers and other dramatis personae that fly, loom, or hover in so many of Chagall's pictures – such as *Over Vitebsk* – do so above unmistakably Russian houses and streets. *The Blue House* (1917–1920) features an *isba* (a traditional wooden house) in the foreground and, beyond it, a very Russian view painted in a style derived from Russian folk art. Chagall also painted a number of delightful views from or through windows, some of them realistic, others in a more symbolic style.

Kandinsky's early landscapes, such as that of Kochel in the Bavarian Alps, divulge some hints of his future Expressionism. But it was only after he went to live in Murnau – in the mountainous area outside Munich, where he shared a house with Jawlensky – that his move towards abstraction began to emerge, with canvasses such as *Boat Trip.* This was painted in 1910, the year before he launched the *Blaue Reiter* (Blue Rider) group together with Franz Marc.

One of the most spectacular landscape painters of the mid-20th century was Martiros Saryan. Despite the length of his working life, Saryan's landscapes never lost their feeling of spontaneity and delight in the scenic grandeur of Armenia and the Caucasus. Paintings such as *Constantinople Street at Midday, The Courtyard of my House,* and *Lake Sevan* show the intensity of his colours and his instinct for dramatic composition. Saryan himself described how the central and southern Caucasus had a special enchantment for him:

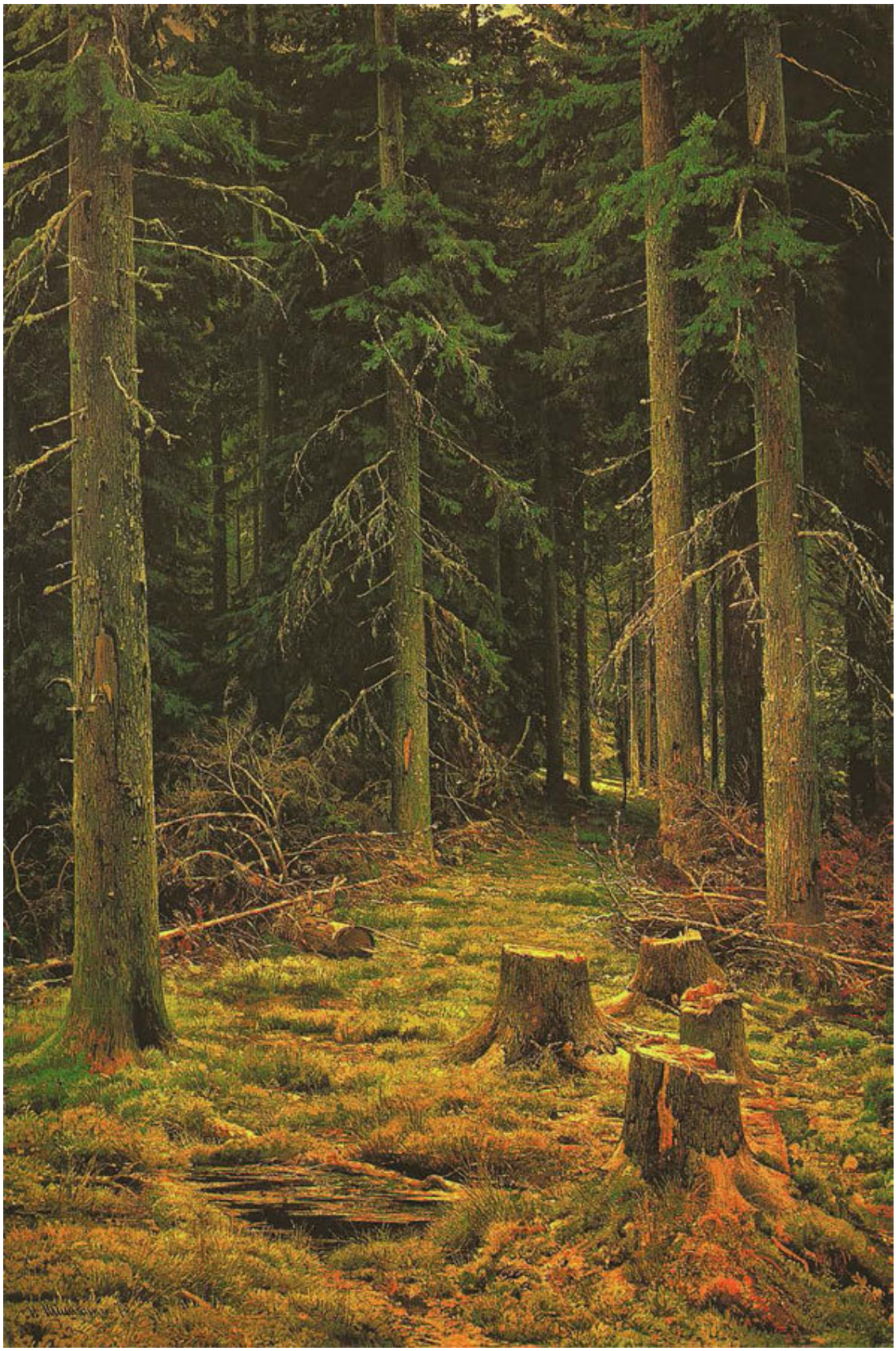
> "There I first saw the sun and experienced intense heat. Caravans of camels with bells, nomads coming down from the mountains with tanned faces, with herds of sheep, cows, buffaloes, horses, donkeys, or goats; the bazaars, the street life of the motley crowd; Muslim women slipping silently by in black and pink veils; the big, dark, almond eyes of the Armenian women – it was all that reality of which I had daydreamed back in childhood… Nature, many-faced and many-coloured, forged by a great unknown hand, is my only teacher."

Evening, 1871.
Oil on canvas, 71 × 144 cm.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Ivan Shishkin and the Itinerants

***Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi**, Portrait of Ivan Shishkin, 1873.*
Oil on canvas, 110.5 × 78 cm.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

The History of the Society for Itinerant Art Exhibitions



Fir-Tree Forest, 1873.
Oil on canvas, 144 × 98.5 cm.
National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk.

The Society for Itinerant Art Exhibitions stands out as the most popular and well known association of painters in the whole history of Russian art.

In the mind of the general public, Russian art of the second half of the 19th century is entirely associated with the work of the Itinerants. Technically this idea is incorrect. The Society's statute was approved on 2nd November 1870; its first exhibition opened on 29th November 1871. It follows that the 1860s – a period which saw a sharp turn towards democratic ideas and practices in the country's art – fall outside the bounds of the Society's history. There were a considerable number of artists who played an important role in the 1860s but did not go on to become members of the Society in the following decade. Subsequently too, there were major figures in contemporary art who remained outside the scope of this particular organisation. In the 1890s, new artistic associations began to appear and it was with them that the future of Russian art was connected.

Nonetheless, the identification of an extensive and important stage in the development of the nation's art with the work of the Itinerants is both natural and justified. Effectively they did determine the appearance and character of Russian art in the second half of the 19th century and represented its chief form of existence. The Society continued to operate for a full half-century, providing a focus for the whole complex of social, ethical, and, of course, artistic issues which emerged in Russia following the abolition of serfdom and other major reforms of Alexander II's reign. It was a specific feature of the situation in the Russian Empire that to a significant extent the task of airing such issues fell to art. In this period, the artists of Western Europe went their own ways. Associations formed with a realist stance and a strongly expressed tendency towards national interests: in Germany, the Malkasten and the Deutsches Künstlerbund, in Bohemia, the Painters' Association and the Artistic Conversation; in Italy, the Macchiaioli group. There was a distinctly programmatic side to the "Pavilion du réalisme" which Gustave Courbet organised as a consequence of his conflict with the jury of the official Salon in France. Nowhere else in Europe, though, was there such a concentration on public and social concerns as in the work of Russian painters.

There are certain chronological ties between the history of the Russian Itinerants and that of the French Impressionists. The two movements were born at the same time, developed in parallel and reached crisis point in the 1890s. The first Impressionist exhibition took place in 1874, three years after the Itinerants' debut. In the 1860s, that period of growth and gathering strength, the future Impressionists, rejected by the official Salon, displayed their works in the Salon des Refusés. That was in 1863 – the same year that the best pupils walked out of the St Petersburg Academy of Arts and founded an independent union, the Artists' Artel. These parallels, though, are essentially superficial. There are fundamental differences between the work of the Itinerants and that of the Impressionists. Stylistically we are talking about two distinct phenomena.

Pine Wood. Ship's Timber in Vyatka Province, 1872.
Oil on canvas, 117 × 165.
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Grove, 1865.
Oil on canvas, 38 × 62.5 cm.
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging the originality of the Society for Itinerant Art Exhibitions, I should like in this present work to examine its activities without forgetting about the existence of a wider, European "context". The Itinerant movement was both a result and a consistent expression of the general currents which governed the development of art in the 19th century. It is necessary to trace lines of evolution, to draw parallels and analogies, which make it possible to rank Russian art of this era alongside that of the European schools. Comparisons only serve to stress the national individuality of Russian artistic culture and, I trust, will act as a guard against subjective evaluations and deductions.

Joining together with others active in creative work was a pressing issue for artists across Europe in the 19th century.

The common professional interests of those engaged in art had long been consolidated in various forms of organisation. In the Middle Ages, artists and craftsmen came together in workshops, corporations, and teams in order to jointly fulfil commissions from the spiritual and temporal powers. As a consequence, creative individuality was brought down to the general level. Works of art were produced by collective efforts and quite often remained anonymous. The subsequent development of art was bound up with a gradual increase in the importance of the individual within it. Artists began to sign their works. Talent found support among the wealthy members of society and the labour of a good artist could glorify the name of his patron. Whilst he had gained an awareness of himself as an individual personality, the artist continued to be in a subservient position, dependent on commissions for his existence. Creative figures tended to group around a religious centre, a court, or a palace.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.