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The Fate of Japanese Collection of V. V. Vereshchagin

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Abstract. The article deals with a collection of Japanese art works of Russian artist V.V. Vereshchagin. It presents the description of the collection. The artifacts are distinguished between the groups and described. The article provides assumptions regarding the causes of the collection sale and its subsequent fortune after the exhibition.

Keywords: V. V. Vereshchagin, Japanese art, collecting.

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V. V. Vereshchagin is a well-known Russian painter, traveler and collector. His visit to Japan was the last foreign trip before he got killed in the Russian-Japanese War. Vereshchagin was an experienced traveler (by that time he had traveled throughout Central Asia, Turkestan, Caucasus, Russian North, Europe, India, Philippines, USA and Cuba), also an artist well-known in Russia and abroad as well as a person who had undergone a lot in his life (in 1903 he was 61 years old).

Wherever Vereshchagin made his way, he returned home with ethnographic collections containing weapons, pottery, clothing, jewellery, arts and crafts, household utensils and objects of worship [9, p. 93]. Obviously, art collecting along with painting and travelling was Vereshchagin's third work of life, which provides him with a place among other Russian collectors. Before turning to the Japanese collection it is important to recall some essential facts about V.V. Vereshchagin's trip to Japan. The painter set off on his journey to Japan in August 1903. He had a long way to make: first by train from Moscow to Vladivostok (over a week time) and then a two day journey across the Japanese sea which ended up in the port of Tsurugu (the island of Honshu) [1, p. 338, 341-342]. In his notes later published in newspapers the painter described his impressions of Japan. Describing Japanese cities and everyday life the author mentions visiting shops in Tokyo and things that he got interested in: «Their junk shops with different knickknacks, statuettes, vases, plates, different kinds of boxes, pottery were really interesting for me... it is hard to convey in words the beauty of these goods, especially if they are made by skillful craftsmen, mainly old men, how original, i.e. genuine they are» [10, p. 139]. The painter admired netsuke – “sometimes you come across real masterpieces of carving”; silk kimono – “what wonderful colours”, “I’m going to buy the whole series of this clothing”; he was also attracted

by the local fabrics and clothing made of them – “their cotton materials are very good – with various and quite often mottled patterns and very original ornaments”, “beautiful brocades”; “silk stitchworks for cushions, bed blankets, for wall decoration and partitions are very good and not expensive” [10, p.139-140]. The upcoming war made it impossible for the painter to stay in Japan. The artist made his way home by sea, arriving in Moscow late in November 1903 after his three months’ stay in Japan [1, p. 349].

On returning from his last journey Vereshchagin set to work on a series of paintings about Japan, but in February of 1904 the Russian-Japanese war began and the painter departed to take part in the military operations where he was killed in Port Arthur on March, 31 1904 when the battleship «Petropavlovsk» was exploded. The property of the painter was inherited by the family – his wife and their three children.

The posthumous art show of Vereshchagin’s paintings and sketches took place in Saint-Petersburg at the Society for Encouraging Arts during November 15 – December 12 in 1904. A special catalogue, was released for the exhibition. However, there is no mentioning of the Japanese items in it [3]. However, in the photo of the posthumous exhibition one can actually see some vases and small items of decorative and applied art, which may well be part of the painter’s Japanese collection [2]. Probably they were also used as decorations for the exhibition.

The whole exhibition had been purchased by the government [5, p. 290]. V.V. Vereshchagin’s paintings were admitted to the Russian Museum [1, p. 367-370]. The family house was sold, the widow with the children moved to a rented apartment in town, so it is possible that the items brought from Japan were kept in the family [1, p. 370-372].

Let’s return to the painter’s Japanese collection now. A comprehensive view of the collection can be received from the catalogue titled “Catalogue of exhibition of paintings and drawings by the late artist V.V. Vereshchagin and his collection of Japanese items (owned by his widow L.V. Vereshchagina)” [4]. The catalogue was issued for an exhibition and sale in the Lemercier Gallery at the address: Moscow, Petrovka, 8, Saltykov Lane. According to the catalogue there were 27 paintings, 75 drawings and the collection of Japanese items for sale. It is noteworthy that the copy of the catalogue available at the Russian State Library does not show the date of publishing on its bibliographic entry in the card index of the alphabetic catalogue. However, this exhibition-sale is indicated in the list of the painter’s exhibitions in the book by A.K. Lebedev “Vereshchagin and V.V. Stasov: with attached correspondence of V.V. Vereshchagin and V.V. Stasov 1885-1904”. According to the book, the exhibition at the Lemercier Gallery took place in the autumn of 1910. [6, p. 235]. Thus, six years after Vereshchagin’s death the items brought by him from Japan were offered for sale.

The section of the catalogue relating to the Japanese collection is covered in the list N 76-355 [4]. The list of items brought by Vereshchagin from Japan provides insight to what the painter found interesting in Japanese everyday life.

The interior design items attract the most attention. The list starts with Japanese partitions which are the most expensive items of the collection – 700 rou-

bles. The list continues with a silk screen with ornaments (150 roubles), a carved table (80 roubles) and several panels: cocks (500 roubles), peacock (600 roubles), lotuses (400 roubles), sea-gulls over the sea (600 roubles), sea-gulls over the waterfalls (500 roubles), night (200 roubles), cranes (2 panels 100 roubles each). The following items can be referred to this group as well: a carpet, 5 strawmats, 6 curtains, lanterns (1 on a stand and 5 paper lanterns) and 3 brooms.

The next group comprises textiles and fabric items: blankets from a temple (2 pcs), table napkins (1 for table and 12 small ones), towels (8 pcs), embroideries (8 pcs). Noteworthy is a big amount of cloths – 61 pieces, besides, along with silk that was usually brought from Japan, there are examples of chintz, cotton and wool. Remembering that in his Japanese notes Vereshchagin wrote with admiration about their cloth ornaments, apparently being greatly impressed by them he made such big purchases. Probably the painter was interested in decorative and applied art of Japan, which explains availability of 8 examples of Japanese carvings.

The list contains a lot of clothing items – belts (10 pcs), without indication if they are male or female items, little scarves (5 pcs), hats (2 pcs), headwear, gowns (40 pcs), probably that was the name of kimono, stockings (3 pairs), shoes (3 pairs), sandals (1 pair), trousers (1 pair). Along with clothing the catalogue presents accessories: various fans (25 pcs) – wooden, embroidered, folding, simple and round with ornaments; umbrellas (6 pcs), bags with ivory buttons (2 pcs).

Apparently, Vereshchagin saw some performances and got interested in Japanese theatre and music, as his collection includes a wig (it is not specified if it is male or female), masks (5 pcs) and a Japanese musical instrument (unfortunately it is unspecified either what type of instrument it is, probably it was a flute, depicted in one of his “Japanese” paintings).

This section of the catalogue presents various trivia: a metal mirror with a focus, that was mentioned by the painter’s son in his memoirs, cache-pot, a saucer, toothpicks, a crochet needle, a stuffed bird (the type of bird is unspecified), a Japanese man made of wood, 4 books (probably on art, the language is not specified), a calendar, 33 postcards, 161 pictures, 91 photographs and paintings: 6 fabric paintings 75 kopeks each and “32 antique rolled paintings” (apparently, the scrolled paintings are meant here, presented in the catalogue with unspecified price). As for the latter items there arises a question why they are left without specified prices in the catalogue if they were really antique ones?

Next comes the section: enamel (N 190-210). The most valuable items of the section – Chinese enamel cups, yellow and blue 100 and 60 roubles accordingly, and an iron lily with an enamel lid – 50 roubles. This section also includes some vases, cups, a plate and a saucer, an antique enamel vessel with a lid, an enamel box with a carved lid, ash trays, buckles, a sand box, an inkpot.

The next section is dedicated to bronze items (N 211-249). The most valuable item is a big vase with dragon – 75 roubles and a bronze lantern with silk – 50 roubles. The list contains the other vases (but less expensive), small vases, cups, teapots, candlesticks, smokers, a sand box, a powder box, an inkpot, a lantern, a knife. Most likely the painter was interested in bronze sculpture, as evidenced by a number of exhibits – a crane on a tortoise, a frog, a crab, a crayfish. This section

also includes netsuke, they are 7 on the list (a dragon, fish, a fight with a monkey and some items without a clear description).

The section of tortoise shell (N 250-271), which includes 16 hairpins, 2 combs, 2 dishes and a knife is remarkable for absence of the item prices.

The section of wooden items (N 272-329), the most valuable item of which is a lacquer bronze box – 25 roubles and a golden ironwood box (15 roubles). The section presents other boxes (a box for gloves and a box with a small inner box), boxes and small boxes, ironwood trays, lacquer trays, a dish, carved plates, baskets, lacquer cups; little trays, different trivia – a plate, a spoon, a comb, a pumpkin, vase mats.

The last section is of porcelain and faience (N 330-355). This section presents items made of famous Satsuma faience. The faience of Satsuma was in high demand in the West, travelers and collectors readily acquired its samples, being possibly aware of it, Vereshchagin purchased similar things.

The most expensive item in this section of the catalogue is a vase (40 roubles). Other items of this section comprise some less valuable items such as Satsuma vases, smokers, tea equipage, Satsuma cups with a saucer, Satsuma toilet cup and many other cups.

Even at a quick look it is clear that Vereshchagin got deeply interested in Japanese everyday life, their national costume, interior design items, tableware, national occupations, decorative and applied art. Presumably, he had various creative ideas about future paintings, on which he could depict these artifacts brought from Japan.

However, there remain some questions associated with the collection. First of all, why wasn't it provided for sale earlier? Probably it is related with, firstly, the Russian-Japanese war as it was only natural that Japan at that time was perceived with hostility and it would be unethical for the family of the painter killed in that war to put for sale these items. Secondly, this collection was the last purchase of Vereshchagin in his last journey before he got killed and L. V. Vereshchagina, deeply loving her husband, was not willing to part with these things.

Why would she put the collection for sale in 1910 then? It is known that Vereshchagina did not live her husband out for a long time. She was diagnosed with cancer, the disease continued to grow leaving no hope for any recovery. In 1911 she committed a suicide in the private clinic where she had been treated [5, p. 347]. It was possible that one year before her death, the money from the collection sale were required to pay for the treatment and education of the grown up children. Then there is another question, why would she put for sale not only valuable things from the collection, that could offer good profits, but also postcards, pictures and all different trivia that are worth 10, 25, 75 kopeks, maximum 1-1.5 roubles per item or the ones with unspecified prices, like the items from the section "tortoise shell"? Sale of these things would not yield big profit, but they could well have been left as the memory of the father. Such a sale could be a reasonable thing in case a family is at risk of slipping into poverty and every penny counts, or when the things are completely unnecessary for the owner for whatever reason. Since there is no any reference of a miserable situation in Vereshchagin's

family at that time the first version can not be valid [5, p. 347]. Most likely, at that time the widow was in a difficult emotional state, being sick and suffering in anticipation of her passing away, hence she deciding to get rid of all the things at once.

It is really sad that everything Vereshchagin was keen on, everything that was bought with love and interest in Japan became totally unneeded over time, including his nearest people.

The content of the collection questions also leaves questions to be still answered. Why does it exclude other weapons except two knives – the ones made of bronze and with a handle made of tortoise shell? Vereshchagin was not only interested in weapons, he was quite knowledgeable about weapons, bringing them back from different journeys, how could he possibly remain indifferent to samurai swords, bows, coats of mail, helmets? Why didn't he purchase any calligraphy kit? Why are there no items, related to spiritual life and beliefs of the Japanese (except some temple blankets and smokers) – such as images of Buddha, Daruma, Jido, fox god Inari, tanuki? Although Vereshchagin intended to make a series of paintings about Japan, so he might be fairly in need of such different items.

Probably, the purchaser of the items from Vereshchagin's Japanese collection will remain unknown. There were a lot of major collectors in Russia, who might be interested in items of Japanese art. Did any items from Vereshchagin's collection get into other collection or museums? The next question is, if any items from Vereshchagin's collection could be of any interest to major collectors. If someone had been eager to buy those "ancient rolled paintings", then probably they would not have been part of the exposition, as they would have been previously bought. It is also possible that the items from the collection were simply dispersed getting into hands of lovers of exotic things, who wished to decorate their homes with beautiful objects.

It is also possible that some of the Japanese items from Vereshchagin's collection got on the territory of contemporary Ukraine. The fact is that in 1914 members of local art society founded the Museum of Fine Art in the city of Nikolaev which was named after Vereshchagin. The society was greatly assisted by I.E. Repin. It was opened on June 6, 1914 – in the year of the 10th anniversary of the tragic deaths on the battleship "Petropavlovsk" of the Vice-Admiral S.O. Makarov and painter of battle scenes V.V. Vereshchagin. It should be noted that Nikolaev is the hometown of Admiral S.O. Makarov. The main part of the exposition consisted of 148 works by V.V. Vereshchagin (paintings, sketches and drawings) received from the Russian Museum of Emperor Alexander III. At the opening of the museum among other honorable guests there was the son of V.V. Vereshchagin [7]. The painter's family presented his personal things to the museum, which might well include the items from the Japanese collection that had escaped selling in 1910 and stayed in the family [8, p. 18]. However, neither the guidebook of the museum nor the website indicate exactly which items of Vereshchagin got to Nikolaev. [8, p. 18]. For this information one should address directly the museum.

The fate of V.V. Vereshchagin's collection is one of the numerous stories associated with collecting of Japanese art in Russia. Examining of the collection

(with information sources being scanty) and its juxtaposition with other collections reveals Vereshchagin's relationship with Japan and its people, providing insight into the essence of his interest in the culture of this country.

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Судьба японской коллекции В. В. Верещагина

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Аннотация. Рассматривается коллекция японских художественных произведений русского художника В. В. Верещагина. Представлено описание коллекции. Артефакты различаются между группами и описаны. В статье приводятся предположения относительно причин продажи коллекции и ее последующего состояния после выставки.

Ключевые слова: В. В. Верещагин, японское искусство, коллекционирование.

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