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**RUSSIAN GENRE PAINTING OF THE 1860S  
IN THE LIGHT OF CHRISTIANITY**

The purpose of the present article is to approach Russian genre painting of the 1860s from a non-traditional point of view. Instead of assessing it in the context of social history or economic and political theories, this paper will aim to look at the art of the chosen period in the light of fundamental Christian ideas.

No artistic creation exists in isolation from the religious context, to which it is always integrally linked. It is common knowledge that in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia the common denominator of thought, both within the national tradition and the national culture was the Christian Worldview.

For a long time, however, Russian art of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was interpreted as a direct reflection of the democratic tendencies of the time. It is commonly accepted that, following N.G. Chernyshevsky, art was animated by “the portrayal of reality”<sup>1</sup>, the recreation of life “as it is” without any “embellishments” and picturing “the truth of life”. Despite this, however, in the published epistolary heritage of Russian artists of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the names of N.G. Chernyshevsky, N.A. Dobrolyubov, D.I. Pisarev, M.A. Bakunin, H.-T. Buckle, P.-J. Proudhon and others have been mentioned extremely rarely. Today, it is practically impossible to say how politically active and ideologically alert the Russian painters were, and how well acquainted they were with their contemporary socio-economic teachings. The theme of self-sacrifice and the political martyrdom of the regime, with its allusion to Godliness, was present in the prose of N.G. Chernyshevsky and the poetry of N.A. Nekrasov, as well as in the articles of V.G. Belinsky. Relying upon the religiousness of Russian

<sup>1</sup> Chernyshevski N.G. Complete Works. In 10 vol. Saint Petersburg, 1906. Vol. 10, p. 149.

man, the “narodniki” revolutionaries were implanting the concept of saintliness “beyond Christ”.

One of the first critical articles written by Kramskoy (dated 1858) is filled with regret about the surrounding reality, which is immersed “in its own learned/scholastic results, ... proud of its knowledge and worships *a different God* (here and below emphasis is my own – T.U.)”<sup>1</sup>. Poor mankind is defeated – complains the young artist – “decriers of eternal truth” declared the absence of the ideal, daring human curiosity “threw the cover off religion and the material being of this world,” people “forgot the Words of God... that *the beauty eternal and sacred cannot be visible to the eyes of the impious, the deceitful, the temptations*”<sup>2</sup>. Saying this, Kramskoy retains his youthful hopes and expectations and proclaims that soon the world will witness the arrival of a painter who is “faithful to the Ideal” and who will decipher the historical moment in present-day life. Accepting the changes brought by the reforms of Emperor Alexander II and being ready for them, Kramskoy soberly assesses the reality and stays in line with Christian Optimism.

Resulting from disappointment in the Higher Ideal, the attention of the public turns to what was happening around them, to the reality of everyday life. The two are naturally related to a strengthening of the positivistic attitudes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and partly to a decrease in the religious activity of Russian society. The latter does not mean the sharp and final split from the old tradition of Christianity, dating back centuries. When talking about the Russian art of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we should remember that society was “soaked to the bone” with the Christian tradition (this article does not intend to look deeper into the specific issues of mythological conscience of the pre-Christian period). Therefore any discussion of singularities of the national worldview inevitably has to make reference to a hierarchy of values – to the eternal understanding of the beginnings of light and darkness, good and evil, virtues and vices. This certainly applies to genre painting, which, being an integral part of the whole body of art of this period, only at first glance seems to be free of religious content. In the art of painting the presence of this important component of the artistic world vision shows itself – although indirectly – first of all in the form of moral and philosophical meanings, which are ever-present in the pictures. We have already admitted that the present work offers only a first attempt to indicate the dilemma with regard to the most “antireligious”, but at the same time the “most saintly sixties”. This duality definitely requires special and thorough further research. On the other hand, without considering this often latent Christian tradition, “which seems to have permeated into the mentality but has lost visual signs of existence”, according to D.V. Sarabyanov, the analysis of the art of this period is now impossible.

<sup>1</sup> Kramskoy I.N. Letters, articles: in 2 vol./I.N.Kramskoy (ed. and commented by S.N. Goldstein). M., Iskusstvo, 1965–66. Vol. 2, p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 273.

“This tradition acted as if above the stylistic evolution – “above barriers”... like the awakening of memory, mostly happening unconsciously, or to be more precise – subconsciously, the awakening of the conceptions, hidden away in the depths of time and in many cases rooted in religious feelings, in the East European interpretation of different world phenomena, in legends of the Church<sup>1</sup>, wrote the researcher, who was the first in our field to outline the issue.

“The perception of the New Time epoch as unreligious is now in the past,” comments I.L. Buseva-Davydova on the same matter. The literature, the memoirs and the epistolary correspondence all confirm that anticlerical, and especially antireligious, beliefs were adopted only by a certain social strata, while the rest of the population felt itself under the constant protection of divine forces, continues the author. “Such life with a “raised ceiling” was in the highest degree instrumental in developing individual pioussness and the sense of both sensual and spiritual closeness to Christ... The Holy History has become extremely pertinent, gaining a direct relevance to the real life experience of earthly Man”<sup>2</sup>.

The periodicals’ illustrations of the 1860s were available as a reflection of the socio-critical issues and responded to them immediately, “sensed atmospheric fluctuations of public mood,” according to G.Y. Sternin, whereas the art of painting, in its turn, appeared to be more conservative<sup>3</sup>. During the 1860s themselves not a single easel canvas was created that could be linked to some degree to the history of the revolutionary democratic movement. The genre picture of this period is lacking the positive type of thinking, powerful, strong-willed “new people” preaching democratic ideas, who were labelled as ‘nihilists’. You could find them, however, in the portrait painting of that time – for example, in black chalk portraits by I.N. Kramskoy or in later works by N.A. Yaroshenko.

In the late 1850s to early 1860s, critical writing stimulated the development of the national school of art and the creation of genre painting in particular, warning at the same time against imitation of the styles of foreign

<sup>1</sup> Sarabyanov D.V. Russian Painting. The Awakening of Memory. M., 1998. P. 21.

<sup>2</sup> On the Peculiarity of Religious Conscience of the New Time. – see Buseva-Davydova I.L. On the Spiritual Foundations of Late Russian Icons/ Voprosi iskusstvovedeniia. X (1/97). M., 1997, pp. 185, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Facts of the real contacts between the young members of artistic circles and the representatives of “narodniki” intelligentsia, as well as those of the student democratic movement are very rare. The artist F.S. Zhuravlyov was placed under police surveillance because of his involvement with reading of “Kolokol” (a magazine, edited by A.I. Herzen) and printing of other illegal materials. V.V. Vereshchagin smuggled Herzen’s writings into Russia. V.I. Yakobi was acquainted with N.G. Chernyshevsky, communicated with revolutionary activists and also created a portrait of M.L. Mikhailov in shackles. N.N. Ge and A.A. Ivanov met A.I. Herzen abroad, K.D. Flavitsky corresponded with the latter as well as with N.A. Dobrolyubov. Many pupils of the Imperial Academy of Arts supplied the capital’s magazines with satirical drawings.

artists. The public “awaits a Russian subject from the artist,”<sup>1</sup> insisted P.M. Kovalevsky, stressing the necessity of looking for national motifs. The art of painting has to start speaking the language of truth, it has “to leave not a single doubt as to what is going on,”<sup>2</sup> what is happening in the picture. The art must be simple and easy for viewers to understand. Voting for the portrayal of momentary and transient events in life, the critics altogether chose as an example the work by A.A. Ivanov “The Apparition of Christ to the People” (1837–1857, GTG), focused on eternal evangelic figures. The reviewers frequently praised “genre painting with a meaning,”<sup>3</sup> which uncovers the imperfection of life. F.M. Dostoevsky acknowledged the difficulties met by painters while trying to recreate “the real truth.” He saw the task of contemporary art as aspiring to the level of “artistic truth,” which meant being able to look at life not with your physical, “bodily eye”, but with “a spiritual one.”<sup>4</sup>

A gravitation towards meaning has been typical of the Russian character ever since the Middle Ages, known as the epoch of enlightenment and apprenticeship. Is it worth searching for a hidden meaning or, as it were, for a “meaning between the words or between the lines”, in paintings of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where, according to long-standing interpretations, all is very simple, obvious and sometimes even too straightforward? What ideas were feeding “the thoughtful genre” – the most sharp and critically tuned in the hierarchy of genre painting?

The genre artists of the 1860s were above all else honest presenters of surrounding life, capable of seeing in it the ongoing evil. They mostly depict the lowest of human passions: theft, fraudulence, treason, offering one’s pride and honesty for sale, alcoholism, tyranny, violence, avarice, vulgarity – or, in other words, the breaking of the fundamental ethical laws of human existence, connected, in one way or another, to the ten Christian Commandments.

The subjects who populate genre canvases of the 1860s are the common people – middle class citizens, peasants, traders, insignificant employees, soldiers, the poor and the paupers, students, prisoners and convicts, maids, governesses, etc. The man from the crowd, “the little man”, the man of an episode, who had just stepped out of the masses, was put



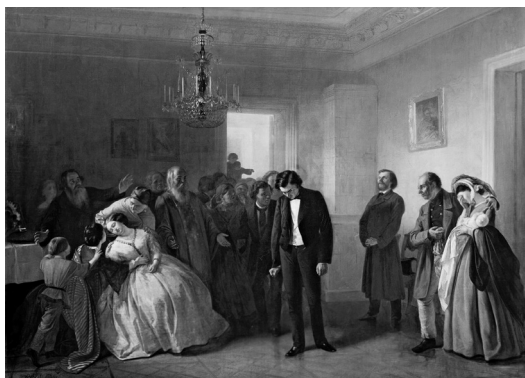
Vasily Khudyakov  
Skirmish  
with Finnish  
Smugglers. 1853  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

<sup>1</sup> Kovalevsky P.O. On the Arts and Artists in Russia//Sovremennik. 1860. № 10. P. 381

<sup>2</sup> Polonsky Y.O. On the Exhibition. Letter 2/Smes'//Russkoie slovo. 1860. № 11. P. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Delo. 1868. № 10.

<sup>4</sup> Dostoevsky F.M. The Academy of Arts' Exhibition for the Years 1860–61/ Dostoevsky F.M. Complete Works in 30 vol. Articles and Notes. 1861. Leningrad, 1973. Vol.19, p. 158.



Adrian Volkov  
Interrupted  
Betrothal. 1860  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

by the painters under the spotlight, right in the centre of their pictures. Getting “on stage” by means of the art of painting, he was given the role of the principal prosecutor of contemporary life, representing a new type of humankind – suppressed, simple, sometimes miserable and voiceless, and in some sense a martyr and a victim of social inequality.

These pictures, with their tendency to condemn, are joined together by several constant characteristics that make genre painting of the 1860s easily recognisable. First

of all, by the presence in the picture of two opposing beginnings which, one way or another brought into life through the plot composition and a certain distinctness of stock characters, appear in the end as the embodiments of light and darkness.

In genre paintings showing the “almightiness of evil in the world”, the roles are strictly distributed between the bearer of vice and his virtuous judge, the same as a primitive folk picture, lubok or magazine illustration. In many of these pictures the line-up of evil people breaking the laws of human co-habitation – highwaymen, fraudsters, liars, rascals, hypocritical officials, family tyrants – is carefully worked out with much detail. (V.G. Khydyakov “A Skirmish with Finnish Smugglers”, 1853, GTG; A.M. Volkov “The Interrupted Betrothal”, 1860, GTG). Even more expressive are the portrayals of the tempters and cunning judges: in V.G. Perov’s picture “The Arrival of a District Police Officer at an Investigation” (1857, GTG) in the foreground of the picture one can clearly see the carafe of vodka and basket of eggs which imply that police officers are prone to bribery. In accordance with the artistic mentality of that period the wrongdoer, even one who becomes so under pressure from unfortunate circumstances that turn him into a slave of reality, full of injustice and apathy towards mankind, inevitably represents the negative phenomenon, naturally linked to the idea of sin. Meanwhile the appearance of a clergyman, empowered with the highest authority, in pictures like “Tea-time at Mytishchi” (1862, GTG) and “Easter Procession in a Village” (1861, GTG) by V.G. Perov, or “The Ward” (1867, GTG) by N.V. Nevrev, and some others, emphasised the measure of sin.

Ideological counterparts to evil and fraudulent persons are the victims of their crimes – suffering and deprived of everything, “the insulted and humiliated”. The most unprotected part of the population are the children, orphans, unhappy widows, young girls being forced to marry against their wishes, elderly men and women, vagrants and people from artistic professions. The female characters are less developed and bring to mind the typical portrayals of “widows” created by P.A. Fedotov and Y.P. Kapkov. All these images are similar in their resignation, shyness and obedience



Vasily Perov  
The District  
Police Officer  
at the Investigation.

1857  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow



Vasily Perov  
Tea-party in Mytishchi  
near Moscow. 1862  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

(K.L. Przhetslavsky "The Family of a Poor Artist and a Picture Buyer", 1857, GRM; M.P. Klodt "Abandoned", 1862, GTG; V.G. Perov "Dvornik (Caretaker) Admitting a Lady to an Apartment", 1864–65, GTG).

It seems that with the new themes and subjects, a new hero should have established himself in the art of the 1860s – a fair, morally impeccable protector shielding the poor from the world's misfortunes and sorrows. Nevertheless, in genre painting of that period you will not find a noble hero standing up to protect the needy, offended, homeless, etc. This position could not have been offered to a man: in Christian tradition this ideal and elevating role was intended for the Saviour himself.



Vasily Perov  
Easter Procession  
in a Village. 1861  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow



N.V. Nevrev.  
A Ward. 1867  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow



The main part in canvases of the 1860s is usually dedicated to an innocent victim who at the same time could not be called a hero in the straight sense of the word. There is nothing heroic to find in his or her life. Most often the victim was depicted in such circumstances where there was no choice and the outcome had already been foretold. The bride is on the brink of losing consciousness ("The Unequal Marriage" by V.V. Pukirev, 1862, GTG), the daughter does not dare to contradict her father's decision (preliminary sketch to "Marriage Arrangement" by N.G. Schilder, 1859, GTG, earlier title – "Forced Marriage"), as no resistance could be shown by either the "The Ward" (by N.V. Nevrev, 1867, GTG) or the lady renting an

apartment (“Dvornik (caretaker) Admitting a Lady to an Apartment” by V.G. Perov, 1857, GTG). The thief waiting for punishment (“The Arrival of a District Police Officer at an Investigation” by V.G. Perov, 1857, GTG) is asking for mercy more out of habit than from the hope of kindness from the power-bearing officials. In Schilder’s “Temptation” (1857, GTG) the heroine looks as if she is trying to push away from her the old rag, offering her to trade her youth and honour in return for a gold bracelet. Behind the girl you can see her dying mother, but here the daughter’s choice is not obvious for a viewer. In the last two pictures, the characters of victims remain untold and therefore do not arouse compassion.

The revolutionary enlightenment found realization in energetic actions capable of changing both the individual and society at large. N.G. Chernyshevsky insisted: “put the suffocating circumstances out of the way, and the human mind will immediately lighten, and his nature will become more noble”<sup>1</sup>. Through Bazarov’s words I.S. Turgenev suggested: “improve the society and there will be no place for illnesses”. Nekrasov dreamt of “re-creating the reality”. The Christian tradition taught that by suffering the feebleness of the world man is being cured. “Suffering is the main fact of human existence...The destiny of every life in this world is suffering...Through suffering a human being is coming to communicate with God, in suffering he is feeling himself God-forsaken. Why does a human suffer? And is it possible at all to acquit God, with such an amount of suffering?”<sup>2</sup> asked N.A. Berdyaev at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Characters of the 1860s personify docility, shyness, loneliness, fatigue, illness and death, provoking the viewer to pity “the offended and humiliated”. Suffering and compassion is the principal motif of genre paintings of the 1860s and 1870s. “We can’t ask for more poverty,” admitted A.I. Levitov, a writer close to genre artists of the sixties. “I had many an opportunity to witness the cold and the famine ... silent depression in peasants’ dwellings ...lifeless faces ... endless tragedy, and I simply weep quietly ... and suffer deeply from a moral pain.”<sup>3</sup>

A.G. Venetsianov and P.A. Fedotov gave up on the dream as soon as they sensed world harmony in the preciousness of painting, in the



Vasily Perov  
Caretaker Letting  
an Apartment  
to a Lady. 1864-5  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

<sup>1</sup> Chernyshevsky N.G. Complete Works in 15 vol. Moscow, 1948. Vol.4, p.121.

<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev N.A. On the Purpose of a Human Being. M., 1993, pp.289–291.

<sup>3</sup> Levitov A.I. The Tragedy of Roads and Villages. M., 1866, p.102.





Vasily Pukirev  
*The Unequal  
 Marriage*. 1862  
 State Tretyakov  
 Gallery, Moscow

calmly streaming light, in quiet laughter, in a smile, in irony and humour. And what about the painters of the 1860s? Having chosen to protect the fallen they lost their hope for a Higher Providence. Their world is full of lies and is powered by fraudsters, thieves, embezzlers and hypocrites. There isn't a touch of truth or beauty left in it. Harmony on Earth is impossible. In the conscience of a believer the presence of hell invariably means the inevitable presence – somewhere – of the other world, that of harmony and joy which are inseparable. In his short story "A Little Boy at Christ's Christmas Party" Dostoevsky states that if even the sinless children do suffer in this world, then there certainly is another better world. Similar thoughts were shown by M.E. Saltykov-Schedrin: "History does not stop simply because lowliness, ignorance and indifference temporarily become the law. History is aware that this will pass,

and underneath it the truth and life are still simmering."<sup>1</sup> The earthly logic clashes here with some different type of logic, a deeper and totally inexplicable one. Judged according to earthly values, the events that are happening seem illogical and unnatural. However, if within the society there exists a reaction against the worthless, the vulgar, the crude – then eyes are opened and the truth of life reveals itself. The demand for justice, distinctly heard in all the paintings of the 1860s, is addressed to the Heavens.

Taking a closer look at the genre paintings of this period, on the fringes of many of them one will notice the image of St. Nicholas, who, from his icon, silently surveys the proceedings in the picture (from afar), the holy face of the Saviour from a gonfalon gazing at the evil happening all around, or a bell-tower in the distance representing for the human subject the connection between the Earth and the Heavens (I.M. Pryanishnikov "Jokers" 1865, GTG; V.G. Perov "Easter Procession in a Village" 1861, GTG). The everyday logic is upgraded to a new level – that of Providence (with a capital letter). The folk saying "Do not live your life as you want to, but as God directs you" reflect the ideas of Christian culture. The presence of Christian motifs in the picture makes its plot clearer. The story itself might be very simple, but another meaning lies beneath it, which is easily picked up by contemporaries, which takes you from everyday life to a different register of being.

<sup>1</sup> Saltykov-Shchedrin M.E. *Literary Critic*. M., 1981, p.184.

In light of the above, an especially striking example is presented by V.G. Perov, leading representative of the Moscow school of the 1860s. Throughout the twentieth century his picture "Easter Procession in a Village", rejected by the Academy Council because of the "inappropriate depiction of the members of the clergy", was described as inadvertently anti-clerical<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, the acquisition of this work by Tretyakov (whom contemporaries remembered as a pious parishioner of the St. Nicholas church in Tolmachi and mostly a man of conservative and protective views) shows that he saw it differently from the ideologically charged art critics.

The foreground of this canvas is occupied by the figures of a priest puffed up from drinking and hardly able to walk and an ugly "baba", a woman with an expressionless, "empty" face. This creates the unsightly, depressing scene in the centre of the picture, near the entrance to the izba (log hut). Here one can also see the icons, paint peeling and turned upside down; the icon with the nearly lost image of Our Lady, the holy book and the Easter egg end up in the mud. Yet the other members of the procession, who are moving away from the viewer, have nothing about them to offend religious sentiments. V.A. Lenyashin drew attention to the orderly, decent figures of choristers, their righteous faces and their passionate involvement in the singing<sup>2</sup>. Nature is not in unison with the unbearable and cruel reality, it is uncomfortable and stormy: the wind is blowing grey clouds out to nowhere – the landscape in Perov's pictures is attuned to the author's voice. The Holy Feast is turned into the opposite.

In V.G. Perov's paintings, as well as in F.M. Dostoevsky's prose, A.N. Ostrovsky's plays and N.A. Nekrasov's poetry, nearly every little line or hint that reveals "the world's evil and darkness" is at the same time filled with the expectation that "the disgust of abandonment" which has descended upon sinning Russia cannot be endless, and the hope for a bright dawn does not die. These thoughts were in one way or another nourishing Russian culture as a whole at that time, piercing through the severe reality of life. Striking discrepancies in life became a point of interest not in themselves, but because of the prospect they could be uprooted by enlightenment. Dreams of eternal harmony – what is now called Christian Optimism – were once the constant attribute of a traditionally strong Orthodox society,



Nikolay Schilder  
The Temptation. 1857  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

<sup>1</sup> Vasily Grigorievitch Perov. Paintings. Drawings. Ed., introduction and chronology by M.N. Shumova. Leningrad, 1989, p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Lenyashin V.A. Vasily Grigorievitch Perov. Leningrad, 1987, p.54.

but were also seen as a far-away unearthly ideal. Pious conviction and hope formed the foundation stone of Perov's philosophy in his 1860s pictures, and were undoubtedly deciphered by his contemporaries.

In the same year that he completed his picture "Drowned Woman" Perov had created a serious and monumental altarpiece "Christ and Our Lady at the Sea of Life" (1867, GTG), which was gifted by the artist to the Moscow church of St. Kosma and St. Damian in Shubino. Our Lady and the child are positioned on a rock, with the "serpent of sin" glistening at the foot of it. It matters not how Perov himself named the genre of this piece<sup>1</sup>. What always matters for him is the respect and worshipping of the Christian tradition, leading to the issues of human existence. As a side-note, let us mention that Perov's literary creations are closely linked to the Holy Writing and full of evangelic images and Christian symbols. His short stories "Under the Cross", "The Great Sacrifice" and "Fanny under № 30" uncover his inseparable connection with the ideal of Orthodox belief.

Beauty, strength, magnificence and perfection of form did not inspire the artists of the 1860s. "...As for truth in art, this is still a big question. And what might always be more precious to us is that which never happened,"<sup>2</sup>, argued in a debate with V.V. Stasov the Academy student and future creator of idyllic scenes à l'antique H.I. Semiradsky. Semiradsky's appeal "to depict that which never was and never will be" was seen by the artists of the 1860s as an absolute artistic crime. Turning their attention to everyday life, they certainly did think about world harmony, but to them it only appeared in the form of aspirations, hopes and dreams.

Interestingly, in the 1860s Perov contemplated the following two works: "The Rendezvous of a Sincerely Loving Policeman with a House Maid Neighbour" and "Convalescent Child", titles that concealed a kind, positive feel and elegiac and even joyful motifs. However, neither painting materialised. Why? Was the artist afraid of falsehood? Did such heroes lack parallels in real life? Was Russian society not interested in them? The depiction of happiness, quiet joy and beauty, a special theme that requires a change

of focus for the genre painter, who initially aimed to uncover the imperfections of life. The rare exceptions only highlight a general pattern in art of the 1860s. (V.M. Maksimov, "Dreaming of the Future", 1868, GTG; "Grandma's Fairytales", 1867, GTG). The scenes of happy family

Vasily Maximov  
Grandmother's Tales.  
1867  
State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow



<sup>1</sup> V.A. Petrov interprets this work as an "allegorical dream", proclaiming the necessity of "abstinence from passions"//V.Petrov. Vasily Perov. The Life of an Artist. M., 1997, p.116.

<sup>2</sup> Repin I.E. The Far-away Proximity (Dalekoie blizkoie). Leningrad, 1986, p.189.

life are unknown to the Russian genre of that period. According to a historian of theology in the so-called ascetic literature, a Christian family has never been presented as the perfect example of Christian ideals<sup>1</sup>. Could the teachings of holy fathers and the historians of religion have influenced the choice of subjects by Russian genre painters? Perhaps, in some roundabout way.

The death sentence to reality, proclaimed by Chernyshevsky as the main goal of art, was being interpreted in Russian painting of the 1860s from the standpoint of the Christian ethic<sup>2</sup>. The artists brought up in the traditions of Russian Orthodoxy were “breastfed” with the basic principles of Orthodox culture and in their way of thinking followed, consciously or instinctively, these ethical-religious rules known to them from childhood. It is important to understand that, despite the long-established assumption of widespread atheist views in Russia of the 1860s, these were adopted only by a certain social stratum of Russian society and did not become universal. Kramskoy, coming from a family of Russian Orthodox believers, was brought up in the traditions of “household religiousness”. “What a sadness and suffering grip my poor mother,” he wrote in the 1860s, “she can’t make herself digest how it could be possible not to go to church, not to listen to priests, not to fast even during Lent. It is hard for her, her son ... is in the wrong, he is perishing.”<sup>3</sup> To be wandering “in search of the exit from the dead end into which mankind has brought itself”, to be looking for veritas, avoiding church rituals and precautionary dogmas, but at the same time not losing faith in Higher Reality – that was apparently the route followed by many of Kramskoy’s contemporaries. One of the distinctive qualities of that epoch was described by archimandrite Feodor Bukharev as the perception of Christianity as something “elevated beyond reach, absolutely not available to all those labouring.”<sup>4</sup> Many artists have walked away from the Church but the faith in a higher unapproachable reality was not shattered by anti-clerical moods. The Church, as the institution of power, as the guardian of strict Orthodox foundations, was gradually losing its authority, giving in under the pressure of the sober common sense of the people, who wanted to understand things “with their own brains” and explain the evolution of life with the help of scientific knowledge.

It is understandable that in folk culture ancestral beliefs remained practically unchanged, and in many artists who came from various distant places of provincial Russia world vision was not damaged by contemporary nihilism. The “men of the sixties” inspired by the noble idea of service to society were themselves people of enviable morals, ashamed of material prosperity, they were considered “moneyless” and aspired to live according to the saying “man shall not live by bread alone”.

<sup>1</sup> Archimandrite Feodor (A.M. Bukharev). *On the Spiritual Needs of Life*. M., 1991, p.16.

<sup>2</sup> N.G. Chernyshevsky was born into the family of Saratov Cathedral archpriest Gavriil Ivanovitch Chernyshevsky.

<sup>3</sup> Kramskoy I.N. *Op.cit.* Vol.1, p.45.

<sup>4</sup> Archimandrite Feodor (A.M. Bukharev). *Op.cit.* P. 16.

The semi-religious tradition of moral edification allows us to read genre pictures, unmasking human sins and vices. Despite the seemingly vast thematic variety, all the subjects are orbiting the same planet – the idea of world sinfulness. The 1860s artistic vision of the world had no place for the bright side of human existence. “Beyond Christ” a human creature loses human appearance, declared the art of the sixties, transforming the prose of life into the area of a sacral dimension.

In the above-mentioned article of 1858, Kramskoy raised a question crucial to the Russian artistic conscience of the second half of the XIX century: “The ideal is nowhere to be found, or is it just not on the pedestal?”<sup>1</sup> Genre painting of the 1860s proves that the unseen presence of the higher Christian ideal and the visible acceptance of the world’s imperfect nature are in fact two aspects of the same process and undoubtedly constitute an important characteristic of the epoch.

When one looks at genre painting with historical hindsight, it appears that many of those pictures, while condemning social evil, spoke a language easily understood and welcomed by their contemporaries. They appealed to evangelical teachings: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour ...In your anger do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen ...Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Acts; Ephesians, 4:25–4:32).

<sup>1</sup> Kramskoy I.N. *Op.cit.* Vol.2, p. 273.