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NIKOLAI GE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The work of Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge not only brings to a close the 19th century, but also opens a new page in the history of 20th-century art. Although Ge was the oldest of the Wanderers, in his work he was closer to the younger generation. His disturbingly emotional expressive painting paved the way for the future language of pictorial arts¹. Researchers unanimously attribute his drawings and paintings of the *Passion Cycle* to early Expressionism. Ge developed a new language in the Russian art of the 1880s-1890s entirely on his own, making an astounding breakthrough from the Academy classicism of his earlier works painted under the influence of Karl Briullov and Alexander Ivanov to the dramatic canvases of the *Passion Cycle* full of pain and passion.

Ge's influence and significance are not confined to the time of his life and active work. As before, the world of his images can fire one's imagination, arousing cold indifference or ecstatic worship in the artistic milieu.

This unusually kind person, who treated people with childlike enthusiasm and was blessed with the gift of compassion, took the difficult road of heretics and pathfinders both in his life and work – by far not a common lot. When his works were in disgrace, he put them on show at his friends' homes, anticipating the practice of “apartment exhibitions” of Soviet underground artists².

¹ Christoph Bolman, a Geneva student of architecture, who discovered Ge's drawings at a flea market in Geneva in the mid-1970s, took them for the work of a young artist (so fascinatingly active was their power). Acting on first impression he dated them to the 1920s – that was how he interpreted the language of the painter he had heard nothing about at that time. (See Interview with Christoph Bolman in *Russkoye iskusstvo* (Russian Art), No. 3, 2005.

² Mikhail Shemyakin recalled that he and his fellow nonconformist artists of the 1960s–1970s found inspiration and support in Ge's experience.



Nikolai Ge
Head of Christ. 1890
State Russian Museum,
Saint Petersburg

Nikolai Ge's painting, especially during the 1880s-1890s, was not understood by his contemporaries and considered sloppy and unprofessional. His art was always open to question, which was still there in the 20th century¹.

During his last years Ge was surrounded by young painters, students of Nikolai Murashko's School of Drawing in Kiev² and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture³. They hung on his lips, adored and worshipped the old artist, but could not or would not follow in his footsteps.

Ge regularly visited Murashko's school and supported it by giving lectures and taking part in discussions of works by young painters, some of whom later came to see him at Ivanovsky farm in the Chernigov province, where he settled in 1876. They worked side by side with Ge in his studio, borrowed books from his library and had an opportunity to listen to the painter and discuss various questions of life and art. Some (like Yaremich) stayed for a long time, others spent weeks and months in his house. The reminiscences of Kovalsky, Yaremich, Kurennoi and Murashko himself focus on two main topics—"lessons of craftsmanship" and conversations about "major" issues of life, the purpose of art and human existence in general⁴.

However, the work of Ge's students from Murashko's school, the so-called Ge gang⁵, turned out to be a far cry from their teacher's daring endeavours. We can be certain about the impact of his personality on his students' life values, but we can find almost no trace of his artistic expressionist quests



Mikhail Vrubel
Head of the Prophet.
1904–5
State Tretyakov Gallery,
Moscow

¹ Ilya Repin called Ge "a failure"; Ivan Kramskoi believed he was taking a "slippery path"; Nikolai Ulyanov wrote in the 1930s that Ge was "still on probation"; in the early 1960s Sergei Romanovich asserted that "the importance and impact of Ge's art has not been recognised by many".

² S.P. Kostenko, S.P. Yaremich, V.D. Zamirailo, A.A. Kurennoi, L.M. Kovalsky, G.G. Burdanov, I.K. Parkhomenko, and G.K. Dyatchenko were in Ge's sphere of influence.

³ N.P. Ulyanov, L.A. Sulerzhitsky, I.I. Bakal, V.E. Borisov-Musatov, A.S. Golubkina and Leo Tolstoy's daughter T.L. Tolstaya.

⁴ "He gave all his soul and the warmth of his heart to young people, when he was with them he changed beyond recognition. As for people like me and of my age, and people he, perhaps, subconsciously, considered hopeless, he looked ... above us or through us, but, in any case, not at us. He wasn't glad to share our company. So he always tended to give us a wide berth. He was always ready to serve young people, explain things and make long, intelligent and informative speeches. *Besedy i vstrechi s N.N. Ge. Stranitsy dnevnika N.I. Murashko.* (Talks and Meetings with N.N. Ge. Pages from N.I. Murashko's diary. Published by L.V. Tolstova // Cit. Nikolai Ge. *Vektor sudby i tvorchestva* (Vector of Fate and Work). International conference papers. Archival publications. Compiled by T.L. Karpova. Moscow, 2014, p. 357. Hereinafter *Collection*, Nikolai Ge.

⁵ See I. Vydrin. *N.N. Ge v vospominaniyakh ego uchenikov* (N.N. Ge in Memoirs of His Students), *Iskusstvo*, 1971, No. 9.

"Pay special attention to how French artists hold their exhibitions", S.P. Kostenko wrote, "maybe you'll find it possible to have something like that for us, **Ge's followers** [emphasis added], in Kiev..." (Cit. E.M. Kuzmin, *Iz Kiev. 25 letiya risovalnoi shkoly Murashko* (From Kiev. The 25th birthday of the Murashko School of Drawing), *Iskusstvo i khudozhestvennaya promyshlennost*, No. 4, 1901, p. 112).



in his followers' works known today¹. His favourite student and friend Yaremich eventually became a museum official (keeper of the collection of European drawings in the Hermitage), art historian, art critic and collector;² Kurennoi became a restorer at the Tretyakov Gallery.

Ge has more in common with Mikhail Vrubel, although they did not associate during Ge's life. It was Vrubel who derived his artistic impulse from Ge. No wonder Ge's hall at the Tretyakov Gallery brings the suite of giants of 19th-century Russian painting to an end and leads us to Vrubel's hall. Vrubel admired Ge's painting *In the Garden of Gethsemane*³. The coloristic – emerald and turquoise – strokes in Ge's *Conscience. Judas* brings to mind *Demons* and *Shells* by Vrubel. The portrait of Savva Mamontov painted by Vrubel in 1897 is reminiscent of Ge's portrait of the historian Nikolai Kostomarov (1870).

Nikolai Ge
 Christ and the Robber.
 1893
 Sketch
 for the *Crucifixion* (1894)
 Kiev Museum
 of Russian Art

¹ This subject has been studied insufficiently; works of Ge's followers have been dispersed among museums and private collections, many of them lost.

² Unfortunately, Stepan Yaremich did not write a monograph about Ge, conceding the right to the artist's son, Nikolai Ge, Jr, who collected materials about his father's work and published a book with a small introductory article (*Book of Artworks of Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge*, Moscow-St Petersburg, 1903 (folder) (Moscow: Posrednik Publishers, 1904 (folder)), but did not write a monograph; the collected material, including Ge's manuscripts, he took with him to Switzerland was lost. Meanwhile, Yaremich published the correspondence between Ge and Leo Tolstoy: *Leo Tolstoy i N.N. Ge. Perepiska* (Leo Tolstoy and N.N. Ge. Correspondence). Introduction and notes by S.P. Yaremich, Moscow-Leningrad, 1930.

³ "He rendered moonlight as if one saw it during a headache. Such effects are familiar to me, I have migraine myself sometimes." (*Vrubel: Perepiska. Vospominaniya o khudozhnike* (Vrubel: Correspondence. Memoirs about the Painter), Leningrad, 1976, p. 167).



Sergei Romanovich
Crowning with Thorns.
1960s
State Russian Museum,
Saint Petersburg

Mikhail Vrubel lived and worked at Ivanovsky farm in the Chernigov province for several years – in the summers of 1897, 1898, 1900 and 1901, when it already belonged to the painter's son Pyotr Ge. Vrubel stayed there with his wife, Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel, a singer at Savva Mamontov's Private Russian Opera and sister of Yekaterina Ge, Pyotr Ge's wife.

In Ge's studio at the farm, where many of his works were still hanging on the walls and folders with his charcoal sketches to the *Passion Cycle* were lying on the table, Vrubel painted such works as *Lilac* (1900 and 1901), *Twilight* (1900) and *Swan Princess* (1900).

Vrubel's drawing *The Prophet's Head* (1904–5, State Tretyakov Gallery) reveals many similarities with the image of Christ in the paintings and sketches of Ge's *Passion Cycle* and proves that Vrubel carefully studied Ge's later graphic and painting legacy.

Valery Turchin singled out a pulsing dotted line of “inspired early Expressionism” in Russian art, going from Ge to Vrubel and from Vrubel to Kandinsky that “was a place where certain spiritual energy gathered and, feeling for a way out of 19th-century problems to those of the 20th century, correspondingly linked those centuries”¹.

Another twenty years went by after Ge's death, and the legendary “Makovets” group (1921–7) of Moscow artists, philosophers and poets appeared on that pulsating dotted line.

Our Prologue policy manifesto of the association, the main provisions of which were laid down by Vasily Chekrygin, stated: “Art must lead the people to the high culture of learning and feeling ... a revival of art is possible only provided there is strict continuity with the greatest masters of the past and with the unconditional resurrection of everything **living and eternal** in it...” [emphasis added]².

The “Makovets” artists – first of all, Sergei Romanovich, Vasily Chekrygin and Nikolai Chernyshev – had a kind of Ge cult. Nikolai Chernyshev's heartfelt and emotional essay on Ge begins with: “I think if I had met Ge in the street, I would have fallen to my knees and kissed his feet. I'm convinced he would not have been offended. He would have realised that he received what was due to him from the man who saw his greatness. But at that time we did not listen to the Divine word of his art, which drowned in the sound of copper cymbals. Neither his huge talent, nor his academic schooling, nor his knowledge of the masterpieces of European art earned him wide recognition among our major masters or the young people. Almost at the end of his life Tolstoy, a man of genius, cast aside the scum of the superficial tastes of progressive-minded society and recognised his art, but

¹ V.S. Turchin, *Ge + Vrubel + Kandinsky = ... // Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 236–41.

² *Makovets*, No. 1, 1922, p. 3.

For Ge's theory of “living form” see article by T.L. Karpova “N.N. Ge. The Art of “Living Form” // *Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge. Towards the 180th Birth Anniversary, 1831–1894* [The publication was timed to the exhibition “What Is Truth? Nikolai Ge. To the 180th Birth Anniversary” at the State Tretyakov Gallery, 18 October 2011–5 February 2012]. Moscow, 2011, pp. 12–35.

not without reservations ... This means that society cannot understand a person of genius at once. It took Ge such a long time to fulfil himself. Despite his early flashes of genius, he often wandered in the labyrinths of public opinion. ...His works showed what spiritual heights Russian art could reach after Ivanov... Only Vrubel followed in his footsteps. For a long time the force of social inertia weighed heavily on Ge. Only towards the end... did he lose faith in the importance of public opinion – ...and without further ado, silently outgrew it”¹.

The “Makovets” artists collected materials about Ge, recorded memoirs of his students; Chernyshev gave Romanovich a photo of the interior of Ge’s studio at Ivanovsky farm, and it hung in his home as a precious relic.

Ge’s work was always in Sergei Romanovich’s field of vision. His painting has a great deal in common with Ge’s legacy both in the choice of subjects, brushwork and composition. As an artist Romanovich had to go underground in the 1930s, and in the 1940s through the 1960s worked on a cycle of paintings on the Gospels: *Kiss of Judas* (1940s, Private collection), *Ecce Homo* (1950s, Private collection), *Mocking of Christ* (1950s, State Russian Museum), *The Crucifixion* (1850s, State Russian Museum), *Jesus and Nicodemus* (late 1950s – early 1960s, State Russian Museum), *Laying the Crown of Thorns* (1960s, State Russian Museum) and others.

In 1963, Romanovich wrote a long, profound and talented article about Ge, which has lost none of its value even now that much has been written about the painter². Romanovich was the first to appreciate the artistic merits of Ge’s works. He wrote about the “burning inspiration”, with which *The Calvary* (1893, State Tretyakov Gallery) was painted. Reading Romanovich’s text, we once again experience the emotional atmosphere of the painting *What Is Truth?* (1890, State Tretyakov Gallery), in which lightning seems to illuminate the floor and the figure of Pilate and to split the world into two parts: “Here in this picture, just as in the later ones, we see liberated energy and a great struggle between Light and Dark”³. Reading Romanovich’s article about Ge, we clearly feel that these are the words of a 20th-century artist, who extracts from Ge’s creative lessons what is necessary for him and understands his work the way Ge himself might not have understood it. Romanovich’s article about Ge is a view of an artist from the 20th century.



Nikolai Ge
Head of Christ
with the Crown
of Thorns. 1892
Study
Nizhny Novgorod
State Art Museum

¹ Nikolai Chernyshev, /Exhibition Catalogue/, Moscow, 1978, p.150.

² S.M. Romanovich, “Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge” // S.M. Romanovich, *O prekrasneishem iz iskusstv* (About the Most Beautiful of Arts). Literary Heritage. Excerpts from His Correspondence. Reminiscences of His Contemporaries about the Artist, Moscow, 2011, pp. 118–47.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

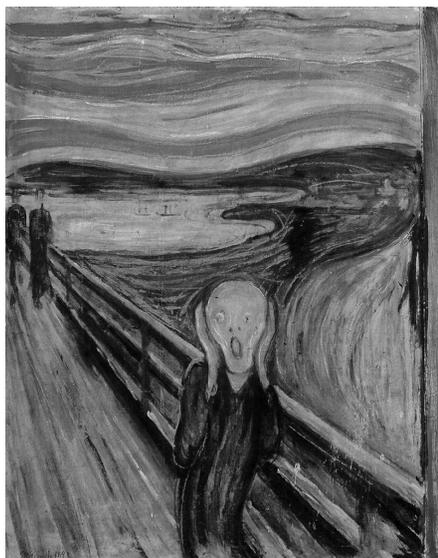
Romanovich held in high esteem the talent of Ge the colourist, the harmony and meaningful relationship between colour and light in his paintings:¹ "... And the colour – nowhere can one find this amazing range of tones, as though they were born together and for this work alone, and have exhausted themselves in it... Standing in front of the painting (*What Is Truth* – T.K.), we witness a great human drama, but to understand it, we need to penetrate the mystery of its painting. The soul of the painting is in its colours, its forms, the vibrations of its surface, and only after we understand them will we understand the essence of the drama"².

Romanovich feels deeply the individual nature and originality of the figurative means Ge chooses or rather, invents for every one of his works, never repeating himself³. "The mystery of moonlight with its charm and its magic surrounds you," he writes about the painting *Conscience, Judas* (1891, State Tretyakov Gallery). "The shimmering moonlight, streaming, live, creating a path of stones; the star mist of the night sky, sparkling and alive ... You are amazed by the wealth of play of this colour, the only one of its kind."⁴ In the painting *The Judgement of the Sanhedrin* (1892, State Tretyakov Gallery) the main colour is red: "No one has ever seen anything like this red colour, perhaps resembling most of all thick wine, which looks like that when there is a dim light behind the glass, such as a candle or red dying embers in the fireplace ... Ge's pictures as the works of a true painter, first and foremost, influence one with their colour."⁵ "The blue (the word itself does not express much) in the *Conscience*, the black and green in the *Garden of Gethsemane*, molten gold and honey in the *Sanhedrin*, and, finally, the brilliant contrasts in the *Portrait of Petrunkevich* are all still unappreciated even now, although it constitutes the power of Ge's art, the likes of which we cannot find."⁶

Indeed, if we examine Ge's *Passion Cycle* in terms of the colour palette, we see that every painting of the cycle was assigned a basic colour of its own –

a blinding lemon-yellow in *What Is Truth?*, a wine-red haze in the *Judgement of the Sanhedrin*, emerald-blue in the *Conscience* and the grey dust storm in the *Crucifixion* (1894). For Ge, every colour was associated with a particular sound (even before Kandinsky's colour theory, Ge came up with that of his own). He told his students: "**I find an awful lot in common between colour and music.** [Emphasis added.]

Edvard Munch
The Scream. 1893
National Gallery, Oslo



¹ Romanovich himself told his students, "Through colour to light – this is our task".

² Ibid., p. 129.

³ Nikolai Ge hated hackwork; he said about hack painters, "He paints as if he were knitting a stocking."

⁴ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 133–4.

⁶ Ibid., p. 145.



Otto Dix
Wounded Soldier.
1916
Etching

Nikolai Ge
Christ Crucified.
Study. 1892
State Russian
Museum, Saint
Petersburg

However, Wundt¹ had already noticed it. When I look at the blue, I feel some kind of quiet melancholy music while yellow and red colours set me in an absolutely different mood.”²

Ge’s intuitive perception of colour was corroborated by the study of colour and the laws of optics. With his university education in mathematics, he could study the latest literature on the physics of colour, which was unknown and inaccessible to contemporary artists. Nikolai Ulyanov, recalling his impression of Ge’s last major painting, *The Crucifixion*, 1894, emphasised the novelty of its colour palette: “Before the picture was removed from the stretcher we had a long discussion, despite the author’s presence, about the formal side of the painting, our opinion of which was almost unanimous. Indeed, it is something new, perhaps it is even the “last word”, which was once so enthusiastically pointed out by my friends. **Actually, which of the Russian artists has spectral analysis, local colours and an additional colour palette?** [Emphasis added.] Ge’s contemporaries, most of whom went in for black painting with its established tradition

¹ Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), German psychologist, physiologist, and philosopher.

² L.M Kovalsky, *Iz vospominanii o Nikolae Nikolaeviche Ge* (From Memories of Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge), Publication by L.A. Amelina // Cit. *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 348–9.

did not nor could know much of what was revealed to Ge's inquisitive mind, who in his old age sat down to study a new ABC of art. Yes, here is the ABC itself or something like that – Ge is showing us a book on physics. ...

We leaf through the book, Ge is watching us, snatches it out of our hands, finds some interesting pages himself and passionately explains the drawings and coloured tables.

“You can't create a picture, if you don't know this ...”¹

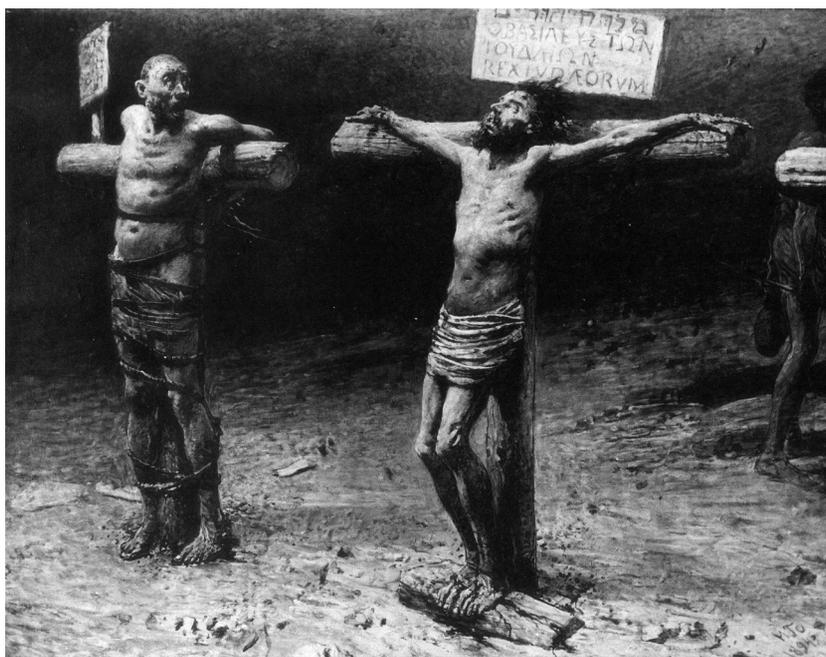
In his diary, Nikolai Murashko put down the advice Ge gave to the students of his school: “In painting, try not to mix more than two colours – only then will you have **pure tones**. [Emphasis added.] When you add a third one, it all looks like dirt.”²

In addition to Romanovich and Chernyshev, Ge's creativity lessons were undoubtedly very important for Vasily Chekrygin, the most talented of the “Makovets” group. Similarities with the charcoal graphics of Ge's *Passion Cycle* can be seen in Cherkrygin's charcoal sheets on “the resurrection” of humanity – illustrations to Nikolai Fyodorov's utopia (*Common Cause*). Vasily Chekrygin's stylistic genetics was connected to Ge and Russian Expressionism, V.I. Rakitin stated in his article to the catalogue of the

¹ Nikolai Ulyanov, *Lyudi epokhi sumerek* (People of the Twilight Period), Moscow, 2004, p. 146. Ge probably showed Ulyanov and his fellow students from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture the work by Michel Eugene Chevreul (1786–1889), *Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours* (1860).

² *Besedy i vstrechi s Ge... // Cit. Collection*, Nikolai Ge, p. 354.

Nikolai Ge
Crucifixion. 1894
Whereabouts
unknown



artist's exhibition in Cologne in 1992¹. Rakitin includes individual works by Vrubel, Marc Chagall, Natalia Goncharova, and Pavel Filonov in the tradition started by Ge.

The theme "Ge and Expressionism" emerged in our art studies about twenty years ago. "The later Ge, without knowing it, was a kind of Expressionist on Russian soil – before Expressionism emerged as a trend in Western Europe."² "*The Crucifixion, The Calvary, Christ and the Thief*, as well as numerous preparatory drawings for them make it possible to foresee the Expressionist future of European art. Here Ge has more in common with West European quests of the 20th century (for example, those of Emil Nolde), than with the Russian ones."³ This theme was developed during the preparation for Nikolai Ge's exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery in 2011–2, as well as in the publications of the international conference held at the Tretyakov Gallery at the close of the exhibition on 31 January 2012⁴.

In Russia, Expressionism did not become an established stylistic trend, as in German art. Russian culture has a few, but unusually bright phenomena and personalities who did not call themselves Expressionists, but were imbued with the spirit of Expressionism. Ge is undoubtedly the first among them.

It is interesting that, chronologically, *The Calvary* (1893, State Tretyakov Gallery) and *The Crucifixion* (1893, d'Orsay Museum, Paris), coincide



Alexander Arefiev
Loose copy
of Ge's *Crucifixion*
(1894, whereabouts
unknown)
Mid-1950s
Made from
photograph
Private collection

¹ "A great exception, in its own way a really isolated phenomenon in the history of Russian art, Chekrygin's work quite logically fits into the history of Expressionist phenomena in Russian art ... the history of Expressionism in Russia, unlike German culture, is not strict lines of development, logically and emotionally defined ... but a relay from one name to another, a constant emotional background of artistic life." (Cit. E. Murina, V. Rakinin, *Vasily Nikolaevich Chekrygin*, Moscow, 2005, p.9).

² N.N. Dmitrieva, *Kratkaya istoriya iskusstv* (Concise History of Art), Moscow, 1993, p. 250.

³ D.V. Sarabianov, *Russkaya zhivopis. Probuzhdenie pamyati* (Russian Painting. The Awakening of Memory), Moscow, 1998, p. 184.

⁴ An exhibition opened in the Tretyakov Gallery dedicated to the 180th birth anniversary of Nikolai Ge. For the interview with exhibition curator T.L. Karpova see // URL: <http://www.the-village.ru/village/culture/culture/109667-v-tretyakovskoy-galeree-otkrylas-vystavka-posvyaschennaya-180-letiyu-so-dnya-rozhdeniya-n-ge>

with a work that marked a turning point for European art – *The Scream* by Munch¹. Most likely, Ge did not know about the appearance of Edvard Munch's famous work in 1893, and Otto Dix's *Wounded Soldier* and *Christ*² distorted by horror and pain were to appear thirty years after Ge's death and to convey the terrible experience of World War I. But already at the close of the 19th century Ge was aware of the general feeling of alarm hanging in the air. Ten years after Ge had completed his final *Crucifixion* (1894), the world would explode with the drama of World War I. Like many sensitive artists, Nikolai Ge felt the terrible tremors of the impending apocalypse. Although he lived on the farm, he nevertheless stayed abreast of world developments, learning about them from newspapers and letters from his numerous correspondents. Ge's work is full of discoveries and a sense of foreboding. In *The Last Day of Pompeii* by Karl Briullov, a painter Ge revered in his youth, the world perishes under the power of doom and the elements, while in Ge the world perishes because it has failed to learn the main moral law given to humanity in the Gospel. In Ge's later paintings one can feel the ground shake as before an earthquake.

There is another theme that unites Ge's work with that of European Expressionist artists – their rejection of civilization, claiming to be the new "Saviour" of mankind without affecting the basic meaning of its existence and turning a person into a consumer of endless technical and household gadgets. Tolstoy and Ge were at one in their understanding that technical progress alone without moral development would lead the world into a deadlock. Ge's withdrawal to the farm, a kind of downshifting, was not only due to economic reasons, but had a deeper meaning.

The question arises whether Ge's work was known outside Russia. When Christoph Bolman discovered Ge's drawings at a flea market in Geneva in the mid-1970s the name meant nothing to him, although not very far away the Chateau de Gingins near Lausanne housed a Ge museum of its own from 1929 to 1952, with the last *Crucifixion* (1894) and numerous sketches and graphic works taken by Nikolai Ge, Jr to Switzerland in 1900³. He did his best to popularise his father's art – held several exhibitions in Geneva and Paris in 1903; at the same time he presented the *Crucifixion* (1892) to the

¹ The gesture of Christ, who, in despair, took his head in his hands ("Oh my God, why have you forsaken me!") in Ge's *The Calvary* almost fully coincides with the gesture of the hands of Munch's character shouting on the bridge, while Christ writhing on the cross in pain and screaming in *The Crucifixion* at the d'Orsay Museum, and graphic sketches for it, are comparable with the emblematic work of the Norwegian painter in the power of emotion and means of expression. (See *Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge, Towards the 180th Birth Anniversary...* pp. 330–5.)

² The incredible expressiveness of broken, twisted paper-scratching strokes and lines in Ge's *Christ Crucified* (1892, State Russian Museum, Inv. P-13269), where the exhausted and humiliated Jesus is looking with his huge eyes full of suffering at the world that "lieth in wickedness" is echoed in Otto Dix's graphic works with a concentrated expression of the destruction of human dignity brought by World War I.

³ The display was opened to the public in 1936.



Luxembourg Museum in Paris¹ (today it is in the d'Orsay Museum on permanent display). But Ge's art did not get a wide response in Europe – it remained alien and incomprehensible. Edvard Munch considered Dostoevsky his favourite writer who influenced all his work, but he did not see or recognise Ge.

Ge did not accept art focussed primarily on solving formal problems. This explains his lukewarm attitude to French Impressionism². Ge's attitude to Symbolism was ambiguous and requires special consideration.

The language of Symbolism was for Ge too conventional and theoretical; it could not solve the problem he considered to be most important – to express a live content in a live form. Nikolai Murashko put down Ge's opinion about the art of Symbolism: "As for the Symbolists, they are not satisfied with realism and are looking for spiritual things in art, but the spiritual apart from the real-life and the corporeal does not exist for us. The spiritual is only in the moral, therefore, it [*the art of the Symbolists*. – T.K.] is not on the right track."³ Symbolism repelled Ge with its notes of lethargy, fatigue, and pessimism; the ambivalence of ethical and aesthetic concepts, the so-called "fin-de-siècle mood" was alien to him. "The search for new roads continues, but it is **hampered by doubts and fatigue – this is**

Alexander Arefiev
Crucifixion. 1954
Private collection

¹ It was exhibited in the Luxembourg Museum from 1903 to 1922.

² N.I. Murashko recalled with what pleasure and sympathy Ge repeated V.M. Maksimov's phrase, which he said at a Wanderers' meeting: "Look here, he said, everything is all right, but we have too much of French stuff here. How beautifully he put it, see: too much of French stuff." *Besedy i vstrechi s Ge...* // Cit. *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 369.

³ *Besedy i vstrechi s Ge...* // Cit. *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 360–1.

the hallmark of our time. [Emphasis added.] Doubt is useful because it is an element of nature, but fatigue is a bad sign. An artist must have moral balance,” he said to Yaremich during an evening walk in the poplar alley on the farm on 31 January 1894¹.

However, the artists and writers of the Symbolist circle were keenly interested in Ge’s legacy. Thus, the Moscow Symbolist magazine *Zolotoye runo* (Golden Fleece) published nineteen works by Ge in the fourth issue of 1909 (mainly of his later period connected with the *Passion Cycle*) and two articles about the artist. One of them was authored by his grandson – Nikolai Petrovich Ge². The other was written by Vasily Milioti³, a member of the “Blue Rose” association and head of the *Zolotoye Runo* art department.

A selection of materials about Ge appeared in the magazine in the last year of its existence. That period was marked by a sharp polemic with the magazine *Vesy* (Scales). *Zolotoye Runo* opposed *Vesy*’s aestheticism and individualism with an understanding of art as meeting the religious and moral demands of society⁴.

Ge’s grandson Nikolai Petrovich wonders whether his grandfather’s works are necessary in the 20th century and answers in the affirmative: “Yes, probably they are necessary, as everything absolutely sincere, so as not to fall into inertia and sleep...”⁵ Nikolai P. Ge compares Ge’s work to Dostoevsky. He appreciates the artist’s desire to “speak about what is most socially important and exciting.”

Ge’s work was next in demand in the 1950s–1960s, with the alternative, unofficial postwar Russian art. Sergei Popov associated Alexander Arefyev⁶, a member of the “Order of Mendicant Painters”, with “Ge’s vector”. In the late 1950s Arefyev made a free copy of Ge’s later *Crucifixion*, with an emphasis on the crucified thief. In his works, such as *The Crucifixion* (1954, N. Blagodatov’s collection, St Petersburg) and *Prometheus* (1963, D. Shagin’s collection, St Petersburg), Arefyev continues his dialogue with the images of Ge’s paintings.

¹ At the Pliski farm and in Kiev. From S.P. Yaremich’s Diaries, 1891–6, Publication by S.L. Kapyrina // *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, p. 384.

² Nikolai Petrovich Ge (1884–1920), nicknamed Kika at home, writer, art historian and art critic, was the son of Pyotr Nikolaevich Ge, the artist’s youngest son. He graduated from the philology department of St Petersburg University, wrote critical reviews of Russian and West European art and published articles in the magazines *Russkaia mysl* (Russian Thought), *Zolotoye runo* (Golden Fleece), *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art), *Novy put* (New Way), and *Literaturnoye nasledstvo* (Literary Heritage). He was friends with Mikhail Vrubel, wrote articles about him and translated them into German, he also helped Yaremich with his book about Vrubel (1911).

³ V. Milioti, “Zabytye zavety” (Forgotten Precepts) // *Zolotoye runo*, No. 4, 1909.

⁴ I.M. Gofman broached this topic in his article “Nikolai Ge in the Evaluation of the *Zolotoye runo* Magazine” // *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 222–35.

⁵ N. Ge [N.P. Ge], “Neskolko slov o Ge” (A Few Words About Ge) // *Zolotoye runo*, No. 4, 1909.

⁶ S.V. Popov, *Vozdeistviye iskusstva Nikolaia Ge: skvoz XX vek* (Impact of Nikolai Ge’s Art Across the 20th Century) // *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 262–73.

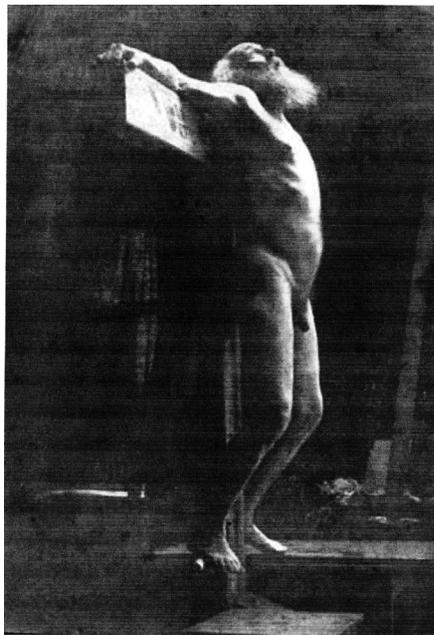
Soviet underground artists put great importance on Ge's independent stand in art, his persistent refusal to comply with the contemporary aesthetic requirements and his way of liberating himself from the aesthetic dogmas of his time¹.

Provocation is another area which brings Ge closer to the alternative art of the 20th century. Naturally, he never aimed at provocation for its own sake. His task was to encourage viewers not to admire, but to act: "I will shake their brains with Christ's suffering. I will make them weep, and not slobber over it."² Using emotional shock to make one think, forget about petty everyday interests – that was his aim. Murashko relates Ge's story about his latest experience with exhibiting *The Crucifixion*: "... The Tsar did not like it, but he returned to the picture three times – it means, **it really got to him** [emphasis added], said Ge laughing."³

Ge's radical practices paved the way for the practices of actionism and conceptualism in 20th-century art.

Ge had his own system of working with models, who included not only professional sitters, but also volunteers – his students and acquaintances. It was real torture for those posing in difficult postures on the cross for *The Crucifixion*. Ge waited for their suffering to become unbearable and only then did he take up his brush. He himself "ascended" to the cross not so much as to show the sitter his posture, but to try on the role of Christ, "put his fingers into the wound" – feel the physical pain and suffering of Christ. There is a photograph of the naked old Ge on the cross taken in his studio on the farm⁴, and a series of photos of Yaremich in the nude posing as Christ and the thief.

Ge wanted active, direct contact with the public. He provided the paintings of the *Passion Cycle* with a lot of verbal comments, which have reached us in the records of the participants of "apartment" shows, members of the Tolstoy family, and different friends and acquaintances of the artist. Ulyanov, Murashko and Tatiana Tolstaya noted that without Ge's passionate speeches – he was an excellent speaker – something seemed to be lost,



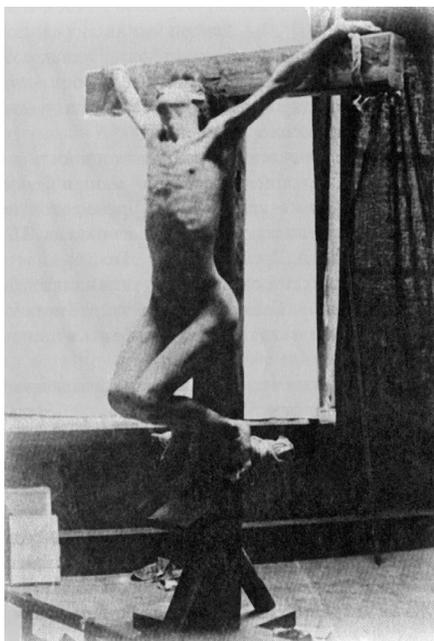
Nikolai Ge posing as the crucified Jesus in his studio on Ivanovsky farm. 1892
Photograph by L.M. Kovalsky
I.I. Vydrin collection, Saint Petersburg

¹ "It took him many years of uphill battle to gain this opportunity to be free. To rely only on himself, to find unconditional faith in himself in his art the way he can and wants to." (S.M. Romanovich, *Nikolai Ge* // S.M. Romanovich. Op. cit., p.119).

² Grigory Ge. *Vospominaniya o khudozhnike N.N. Ge kak material dlya ego biografii* (Reminiscences about the Painter N.N. Ge as Material for His Biography) // *Artist*, No. 43, 1894, Book 11, p.133.

³ *Besedy i vstrechi s N.N. Ge...* // Cit. *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, p. 362.

⁴ This photo was taken by Ge's pupil L.M. Kovalsky in 1892; it is in I.I. Vydrin's archive in St Petersburg and was first published in the catalogue of Ge's anniversary exhibition in 2011 (p. 366).



Stepan Yaremich posing as the crucified Jesus in Ge's studio on Ivanovsky farm. 1892
Private collection, Saint Petersburg

the impression of the paintings waned. Apparently, those verbal comments were an essential part of the artist's concept. Not everything could be expressed in the picture, a semantic and emotional context was necessary, which was created by Ge's texts, talks and lectures. No wonder he dreamed of a printed edition of the *Passion Cycle* accompanied by his own texts.

Ge's moral maximalism and extremism delighted some people and frightened others. At the time when art began to get actively involved in the sphere of market relations, Ge took a stand of principle as a non-commercial artist and fierce critic of salon art¹. He paid dearly for his love of freedom and the luxury of always being himself: poverty, lack of recognition, heavy censorship of his works, which were constantly expelled from exhibitions, and his solitary life on the farm. He could not inspire any of his contemporaries to follow his extremist path. Ge's moral extremism warded off Korovin: "Ge visited me, talked about love and other things ... There is no self-interest in me. I'd really like to sing a song of poetry in paints, but

I can't – I don't have the bare essentials. And if I try to be original, I won't go up the steps of recognition and will therefore have to go about hungry."²

In his article mentioned above Sergei Popov concluded: "... It is clear that it is not a matter of immediate plastic conclusions from Ge's art: these were rather few, and they did not determine the evolution of Russian art. What matters most is that his social stand has a lot in common with many important names and phenomena in 20th-century Russian art. These include frequent differences of opinion, conflicts with the authorities up to the very top (in Ge's case, the Tsar and Chief Procurator of the Synod), bans on the public display of his works, and the practice of apartment exhibitions and public lectures for the initiated audience. But the main thing was the search for truth by means of art, which involved more and more radical means. This makes Ge akin to the mainstream of Russian art, which from the late 1920s to the late 1980s actually turned out to be an alternative art opposing the official. Such a line of succession can be designated as "Ge's vector"³.

Dmitry Sarabianov ends the chapter on Ge's work in the book *Russkaya zhivopis. Probuzhdeniye pamyati* (Russian Painting. The Awakening of Memory) with Repin's words: "Yes, he is an extraordinary man, and his

¹ Consistently rejecting an approach to art as a commodity, as a "wall decoration", Ge refused to use deep gilded frames that emphasised perspective. He preferred black flat wooden frames without any decorative elements.

² *Konstantin Korovin vspominayet* (Konstantin Korovin Recalls), Moscow, 1990, p. 85.

³ S.V. Popov. Op. cit. // *Collection*, Nikolai Ge, pp. 265–6.

talent and soul are burning in him and throw their rays on others...”¹ The boundaries of this article make it possible to discuss only some aspects of the multi-faceted theme “Ge and the 20th century” – “Ge and His Followers”, “Ge and Vrubel”, “Ge and Expressionism”, “Ge and Symbolism”, “Ge and Alternative Art”. The multitude of topics, similarities and parallels around Ge’s name is striking in its richness and diversity and makes it possible not only to look at Ge’s work from the 20th century, but also to find a new way of reading many pages in the history of Russian art of the past century.

¹ Dmitry Sarabianov. “Tvorchestvo N.N. Ge i razvitiye russkoi zhivopisi vtoroi poloviny XIX veka” (N.N. Ge’s Work and the Development of Russian Painting in the Second Half of the 19th Century). Op. cit., p.185.