

# **TEA PARTIES IN RUSSIAN PAINTING IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH – BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: REFLECTIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL HISTORY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tea in Russia is not only the drink loved by millions of people but also a national symbol closely and inseparably connected with Russian culture. The dominance of realism in Russian fine art in the second half of the nineteenth – beginning of the twentieth century gave birth to the widespread popularity of genre painting which started playing a very special role in the country. It is not surprising that tea parties became common themes in these works. Over a cup of tea, the characters in the paintings perform everyday activities: chatting, contemplating, indulging in memories, while taking the opportunity to enjoy their favourite drink.

Paintings are a unique and rarely used source for social history and culture studies as they allow us not only to reconstruct the everyday life of past eras, but also to study how contemporaries saw, perceived, and evaluated a variety of everyday practices. The research undertaken is descriptive and analytical with reference to the principles of historicism, academic reliability and objectivity that help to determine important trends and patterns and characterize the various social phenomena and developments that took place in Russia during the period under study. Unlike Western European painting, the representation of tea ceremonies on the canvases of Russian artists romanticizes both the philosophical aspect and the harmonizing function of the ceremony, but at the same time focuses attention on social issues, which obviously reflects the specifics of national consciousness.

The present research is based on the analysis of eighty-two genre painting works by Russian artists (among them there are the well-known ones by: Ivan Bogdanov, Vasiy Makovsky, Konstantin Makovsky, Vasily Perov, Konstantin Korovin, etc.). They not only provide the audience with information about different aspects of everyday culture in Russia from the second half of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century but also trace the trends in the development of public consciousness and help to determine the main social problems that characterize the historical period and the attitude of society to them. The process of the democratization of society in the second half of the nineteenth century is reflected in the depiction of the ambiguous relationship between society

and the church. The canvases draw attention to the place of tradition in the life of an individual and a family, the changing social role of the nobility which exemplifies the passing era, increasing interest in the way of life of the intelligentsia, and creating the image of the merchant as a new social class with a specific culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the nostalgic description of the tea party as a symbol of a bygone era of prosperity and a lost past prevails.

**Keywords:** *social history of Russia, Russian fine arts of the second half of the nineteenth – beginning of the twentieth century, tea party, Russian nobility, Russian merchant.*

## INTRODUCTION

It was in the middle of the twentieth century when everyday life as a social and cultural phenomenon first came to the attention of researchers. It was examined by philosophers and sociologists from a variety of perspectives: B. Waldenfels, [14], E. Husserl [3] and A. Schutz [10] examined everyday life from the point of view of phenomenology; it was studied by R. Barthes [1] and R. Merton [6] [7] in the framework of structural functionalism; it became a subject for postmodern studies in the work of J. Baudrillard [2] and J.F. Lyotard [5], etc.

But much earlier, starting from Modern History, everyday life became the object of artistic reflections. The birth of genre painting can be considered the main evidence of the existence of a purposeful interest in this area. The genre was entirely focused on recording the routines of everyday life. Unfortunately, this huge array of sources remains almost unexplored so far. Notwithstanding the modern interest in visual sources, philosophers, historians and sociologists do not refer to paintings as a valuable source of academic data: paintings and graphics "do not leave the limits" of art history.

In this article, we present an analysis of the group of paintings created in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century dedicated to the very important phenomenon in Russian culture of tea drinking from the point of view of social history and cultural studies.

The history of tea expansion in Russia is well explored by academics [4] [9] [11], [12]. In recent years, the interest in the topic is on the increase: conferences are held, monographs and articles are published [8] [13]. In our research, we would like to concentrate on the unknown sphere of the topic: representations of tea parties in Russian realistic arts.

The aim of the report is to reveal how and to what extent Russian painting, from the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, reflected the idea that the tea party was an integral part of the Russian daily routine and reflected social realities. What were the connotations of the tea drinking process? How did

Russians consider this everyday act: as a secular ancient tradition or an aesthetic ritual full of philosophic meanings; a depressing and routine part of everyday life; a form of social denunciation?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

We based the research on eighty-two Russian genre paintings (second half of the nineteenth – beginning of the twentieth century); the most complete catalogue of the canvases devoted to the topic was made for the needs of the investigation. The works are created by well-known Russian artists along with provincial ones famous only in their region. There was no need to estimate the artistic value of the canvases; moreover, less important works of art can sometimes reveal the traits of the epoch better than masterpieces.

While conducting research into gastronomic culture, modern academics rarely refer to paintings as a source of information; but we consider visual arts as a powerful tool to fix and examine not only routine aspects of a tea party but to trace its roots in the culture of Russian society and to reveal the peculiarities of the national mentality.

We refer to empirical methods of observation and use generalization and analysis based on the principles of histories, reliability and objectivity as the basic research methods.

## **RESULTS**

No wonder that tea has become the national drink in China, Japan, or India where it grows, is collected and cultivated. But it is amazing that an exotic product from faraway lands became a national drink in a country where it is not produced but just imported. In the modern global world, the fact could be explained easily: we can name a great number of foreign food products that became an essential part of our daily diet. But we are going to talk about the seventeenth – eighteenth – nineteenth – twentieth-century phenomenon when tea (simultaneously with Britain) became not only the drink loved by millions of people but also a national symbol closely and inseparably connected with Russian Culture. The popularity of Russian tea in the country could be (and still can be) compared to only one national drink – Russian vodka!

The process of tea consumption brought to life the industries producing tea accessorises, tea crockery, tea furniture. It formed cultural and family customs and traditions, influenced national cuisine and eating etiquette. Tea parties were depicted by artists.

Genre painting is presumed to display everyday practices on canvas while creating a sense of place. It is generally recognized that genre painting appeared in Russia in the first half of the XIX century – which is much later than in other

European countries. However, for a long time its positioning in the hierarchy of genres was one of the lowest, reflecting the fact that the attitude towards this genre was far from reverential.

The situation changed only in the second half of the XIX century, when realism was proclaimed as the leading movement in art.

The daily life of society in general and of the individual, in particular, became the subject of artistic interest: the household genre manifested its place in Russian art. Neither before, nor since this time in the history of art in Russia, has it occupied such an honorable position. Consequently, tea drinking has not been such an important theme either before or after this period.

The analysis presented in the research defined three main forms of the tea party present in the works of the nineteenth-century Russian painters:

- the tea party as a form of social criticism
- the tea party as a form of narration about everyday practices
- the tea party as a form of poetic admiration

All three existed in parallel. The characteristic features, vitality and presenting this or that topic on canvases varied due to the social and cultural peculiarities of the historical period. For example, in the middle and the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia accusatory pathos became the central topic of the artistic works, while at the turn of the century, poetic and aesthetic motives prevailed and influenced the way tea parties were presented on canvas.

Not in any other national art school have the topics dealing with tea consumption become the basis for social injustice and accusation. In Britain, for example, the depiction of tea rituals is always conflict-free: the space is socially homogeneous presenting people from the same social group, no outsiders can be involved. In Russian painting, the situation is very different. The harmony of a tea party space commonly trespasses, the artists depict people who, due to their social status, can by no means be allowed to participate in the action or be invited to share a meal at the table. On the canvases, they usually stand at a distance and are depicted to draw the audience's attention to the problems of suffering and destitution or even inequality and abuse. It can be seen it in the works by Ivan Bogdanov (*For Payment*, 1890), Vasiy Makovsky (*Hiring a servant*, 1891) and others. Social denunciation is often expanded by adding anticlerical motives: in this case a monk or a priest is the person drinking tea; he is fat, satisfied and indifferent to anyone else's needs (*Alexey Korsukhin*, *In The Monastery Hotel* (1882), *Vasiliy Perov*, *Tea Party in Mytischy* (1861), etc.).

In the painting *Tea Party in Mytischy*, we can see a priest sitting at tea, his eyes half-closed. He does not notice the beggars standing in front of him pointedly: a soldier, who lost his leg at war, and a child. Tea drinking here is

synonymous with indifference; it shelters the need for compassion, which is a feeling one could expect would arise in a priest.

Now we will turn our attention to how the compositional schemes are repeated in the "accusatory" works listed. On the left side people are always sitting, while on the right side - they are standing; on the left side - the subjects are well-fed and indifferent, while on the right – we see the unhappy and the offended. The persistence of the composition involuntarily echoes the Christian understanding of the left (as sinful) and the right (as righteous).

Presentations of tea parties on the canvases allowed for a reflection of social and cultural processes. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the main heroes of the works of art were noble people. In the second half of the century and later on, the situation changed due to democratization tendencies in Russian society: peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, merchants, priests became the main subjects of paintings while depictions of the noble tea party tradition is out of fashion. If you find noble people in the picture they are “endangered species”, very old and decrepit old men and women (Konstantin Makovsky, *Lady of the Manor* (1888), Vasily Maksimova, *Everything is in the Past* (1889)).

Maksimov’s painting thoroughly collects and displays the wreckage of a once magnificent world: a decaying uninhabited manor house in the background; dying trees in front of it, the decrepit landlady of the destroyed «gentlefolk», an exhausted dog at her feet, and an old servant woman next to her. Of course, in this case, there is not any grandeur or aristocracy in the depiction of the tea party: no performers, no entourage, no proper place of action. The remaining scattered pieces of a once expensive full set of china wear look inappropriate on the wooden steps and weedy lawns; the same happens to the old-fashioned lace, furs, and velvet clothing of their owner. Indeed everything remains in the past. It is significant, that it was the tea party scene that the artist needed for the most adequate expression of the idea suggested by the title of the picture.

Arts impartially and cruelly monitored social and cultural changes of norms and practices: noble values and patterns fell into disuse, no nostalgia, no compassion or at least “admiration of the passing trend” was involved.

More and more often tea parties were interpreted as a routine activity, an occupation that inevitably followed the everyday existence of a person and not connected with global or painful issues of contemporary realities.

Dozens of works of art showed people listening to birds singing while drinking tea (V. Makovsky, *Nightingale Lovers* (1873)), philosophical conversations (Vladimir Makovsky, *The Conversation. Idealist-expert vs. Materialist-theorist* (1900)), meetings and send-offs (Alexey Korzukhin, *Parting* (1872)), writing letters (Vasilii Golynsky, *Letter to Petersburg* (1902)), family parties (Nikolai Bogdanov-Belsky, *Birthday Party in the Garden* (1920)),

discussions of household issues (Konstantin Makovsky, *Household Conversation* (1862)), moments of recreation at home with the family (Alexander Gerasimov, *Tea Party* (1915)).

An unhurried course of routine life in paintings is lovingly revealed in details: it is full of numerous everyday features. The author's intonations, sometimes serious, sometimes touched with a good-natured smile or light irony, do not contain even a shadow of condemnation of the "joys of philistine life". Despite the fact that the tea party in most of these works is not a central but a concomitant event, it does not appear by chance, each time focusing on the private, family, everyday nature of the event, introducing this moment in the context of the day-to-day circle of human existence.

If a painter happens to depict the members of his family drinking tea the topic becomes very intimate and family values are of primary importance (Konstantin Korovin, *At the Tea Table* (1888), Boris Kustodiev, *On the Terrace* (1906), Lukjan Popov, *In the Garden. Tea Party* (1911)).

The topic that unites all these works is: the harmonious and happy existence of an artist's family. The canvases do not tell stories or depict events. People are never in a hurry, nothing disturbs them. They are calm and content. The artist tries to communicate the feeling of comfort and a homely atmosphere. Parents and children, pets, white tablecloths, light clothing, samovars, pots, chinaware: all these details are presumed to create a poetic atmosphere of everyday realities.

The tea party is moved out of the traditional home settings: it now takes place on the terrace, in the garden, or on the playground in front of the house, which enhances the sense of poetic harmony of the event. The routine household details are replaced by the silence of a beautiful summer landscape.

The table, at which the household is gathered, is placed near the foreground of the picture so that you can see a few, simple, but rather refined details of the serving. Still, life plays an important role in the paintings, where the time of tea drinking appears as a moment of fullness, joy and spirituality of being. It is important for the artist to show how the sun reflects on the glass, how the porcelain glitters coldly, how the colored highlights fall on the white tablecloths. The life of things becomes an organic and necessary part of the depicted world: objects do not convey information but form a poetic and esthetic kind of environment.

The Russian painter Boris Kustodiev praised the everyday life of tradesmen. In his pictures, you will see curvy merchant women and bearded merchantmen. He created about two dozen paintings, in which the characters drink tea, and sit at a table with a samovar on it. B. Kustodiev can be called the creator of the visual formula of the Russian merchant tea party.

None of the paintings from the second half of the nineteenth century, mentioned in this paper, can be considered a hymn to hedonism. Even if the artists were interested in the objects displayed on the table, and they carefully depicted the treats displayed on it, the images of the treats struck the viewers with their restraint, or even asceticism. Bread, jam, bagels form the main "tea set essentials" within Russian painting. Boris Kustodiev was the first artist to get inspired by the generous, excessive beauty of merchant life. His feasts feature the merchants sitting at tables that represent luxurious still lives with a variety of pastries, a tray with all sorts of fruits next to it, and an indispensable watermelon that rises above. The painter continued admiring the redundancy of their life even creating his works during starvation in post-revolution Leningrad.

If you look at the dates when most of the «tea paintings» were created by the artist, it is the period between 1918 and 1926. In reality, during that period, the well-fed life of a Russian merchant that the paintings depicted was long in the past. In contrast to the tea parties described by the Kustodiev's works, a half-starved existence became the norm of life for a significant part of the country's population during that time. The artist himself is bedridden by an incurable disease. However, there is not the slightest hint of the mood of the time in which Kustodiev lived on the canvases dedicated to the tea parties: they present a nostalgic dream of the past rather than a depiction of reality. Kustodiev continued to create his myth about Russia even when nothing that «fed» that myth existed. As a result, his depictions of tea parties are the form of memory of a lost Russia.

## CONCLUSION

Thus we can see that the tea party theme became very important for Russian art in the nineteenth – beginning of the twentieth century. Though being very private, unimportant and domestic, it reveals different and important aspects of social and cultural life. It can be the subject of a light conversation or anecdote as well as the basis for philosophic reflections or criticism of society; it can also inspire authors to admire routine life. The subject not only illustrates the national preoccupation with tea drinking and peculiarities of the Russian tea party but also reveals the social and cultural context of the epoch: the process of the democratization of society, the relationship between society and the church, traditional values of society, the changing social role of the nobility and the intelligentsia, the merchant culture. In the new epoch that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917 and brought a new way of life to the country, the tea party remained a nostalgic relic of happier times.

Summing up, we emphasize once again that tea-drinking, according to modern researchers, is a kind of social technology, a means to influence society in a certain way: "in a series of everyday rituals, it is always an occasion and a consequence of the interpenetration of being and everyday life, a way of establishing world order, harmonizing what is happening." [15] Yet, not everything was so unambiguous in the Russian tradition. Paintings, a valuable but

undervalued source, provide unique information on various aspects of social history. Artists demonstrated the harmonizing function of the tea ceremony, while at the same time underlining its insecurity and its dependence on social issues, and they worked on these two elements with the same level of intensity. Obviously, this fact can be explained by the peculiarities of Russian national consciousness as opposed to, for example, as mentioned above, English painting where it is impossible to find canvases in which the tea ceremony would be used to present social problems. In Russian painting, there were two mutually exclusive tendencies: to glorify, to emphasize the harmonizing function of the tea ritual and at the same time to destroy it, turning the tea party into an expression of social injustice. In the first case, the tea party is a symbol of pleasure, far removed from any problems and complex issues, while in the second, it is a symbol of the "abused tea party", a harsh and direct form of social denunciation. This duality is the most important feature of the Russian consciousness. The works of art manage both: to praise and enjoy as well as denounce and destroy. Russian painting from the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century exposes this duality with a visual certainty.

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