

The Development of Russian Historical Painting Under the Influence of “French Centrism” - Taking Ivanov’s “Christ Appearing to the People” as an Example

Yuyan Wang^{1*}

¹ Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email Address

yywang0306@163.com (Yuyan Wang)

*Correspondence: yywang0306@163.com

Received: 21 August 2025; Accepted: 18 September 2025; Published: 20 November 2025

Abstract:

This article takes Russian academic painter Alexander Ivanov’s masterpiece “Christ Appearing to the People” as an example to explore the development of Russian historical painting under the influence of “French Centrism.” Alexander Ivanov’s artistic creations not only provided Russian historical painting with a unique aesthetic language but also broke through the “deified” classical historical painting themes, shining with humanistic brilliance. Meanwhile, the passing of this great master also signaled the end of Russian historical painting and the emergence of a new artistic direction.

Keywords:

Ivanov, The Appearance of Christ to the People, Historical Painting

1. Introduction

The concept of “historical evolution” has long been central to art history. This ‘evolution’ not only reflects the span of time but also manifests in the shift of “authoritative centers,” which can also be understood as changes in “regional centers.” From the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century, France gradually replaced Italy as the new “regional center.” Simultaneously, the art history narratives of countries and regions outside France typically adopted the principle of “similarity to France,” with their inclusion in art history determined by the degree of their ‘similarity’ to France. Parts that could not be narrated using this principle were regarded as “historically marginal” and excluded from art history. [1] This reflects the artistic evaluation trends of the time. In the first half of the 19th century, Russia, spanning both Europe and Asia, entered the “French-centric” narrative, and Russian art began to be incorporated into the development of European art and literature. In the 19th century, Russian painter Alexander Ivanov challenged the European classical artistic narrative with his large-scale oil painting, “Christ Appearing to the People,” paving the way for Russian historical painting to take a new direction.

2. The Artistic Career of Alexander Ivanov

In 1817, Alexander Ivanov entered the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts under the influence of his father, Andrei Ivanovich Ivanov. The academic education system provided Ivanov with ample artistic nourishment, but due to political pressure, his graduation work, *Joseph Interpreting Dreams in Prison*, was criticized by the Pope. The academy's president, Orenin, commissioned Ivanov to create the work “*Bellerophon Setting Out to Slay the Fire-Breathing Monster Medusa*” to uphold the legitimacy of Tsar Nicholas I. However, Ivanov refused to yield to government pressure and ultimately had to leave his homeland for Italy.

In 1831, Ivanov settled in Rome, where he studied ancient Greek and Roman art as well as works from the Renaissance period. While captivated by classical art, he also endeavored to create genre paintings addressing fundamental social issues, such as “*A Man's Head: A Study of the Pain of a Paralyzed Patient*” and “*Portrait of Victoria Marini*.” These portraits demonstrate Ivanov's precise grasp of human characteristics, reflecting both his academic training and humanitarian concern for the common people. In addition to his own explorations, Ivanov also befriended some Russian intellectuals. Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol helped Alexander find his artistic mission. “Combining Raphael's techniques with the ideas of modern civilization—that is the task of art today.” Ivanov believed that a noble spiritual realm should be expressed through beautiful artistic techniques; otherwise, important ideas could not be conveyed through art. [2] Additionally, influenced by Nikolai Matveyevich Rozanin and Friedrich Overbeck, Ivanov firmly vowed that from now on, he was an artist, a prophetic artist, who firmly believed that art would change the world and help humanity achieve moral rebirth and perfection. [3]

The 1848 Italian Revolution deeply influenced Ivanov, inspiring him to conceive a grand vision: he sought to document the life of Jesus, including stories from the Old Testament, to create an ideal world where humans and gods are equal. Over several years, he created 500 murals within a building known as the “*Temple*,” continuing his work until the end of his life. In 1858, this master painter, who had dedicated his life to pursuing artistic ideals, passed away on July 3 in St. Petersburg. After his death, the sketches he created were referred to by scholars as “*Biblical Sketches*” and are now preserved in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Gogol wrote in his evaluation of Ivanov: “Ivanov did not seek material gain, nor did he seek anything in life, for he had already dedicated himself to artistic work and had no time to spare for other matters in the world.” [4]

3. The Artistic Characteristics of “Christ Appearing to the People”

In the mid-to-late 1830s, the Romantic painter Bryullov created his masterpiece, “*The Destruction of Pompeii*,” which undoubtedly served as a reference for Ivanov's work. However, Ivanov examined historical artistic creations, whether the conservative traditional works of the academic school or the passionate and thrilling works of Romantic painters, none of which satisfied him. At the same time, Bryullov could no longer surpass his earlier achievements. Therefore, Ivanov decided to take on the responsibility of his time and embark on new artistic explorations, which marked the beginning of the creation of the masterpiece “*The Appearance of Christ to the People*.”

Christ Appearing to the People depicts the prophet John holding a cross made of reeds, pointing toward Christ coming from afar, and addressing the believers gathered

by the Jordan River for baptism: “The one coming toward you is the one who can save you.” Ivanov’s depiction of Christ’s face aligns with the standard features of the “Holy Face”: a triangular beard, long hair parted in the middle, and the image of a lean-faced middle-aged man. However, he has his own unique way of creating the atmosphere of the scene: at the moment of Christ’s appearance, the passionate world seems to have calmed down. The overall composition no longer embodies the eternal quality of a single moment, as in “The Last Days of Pompeii,” but instead conveys a sense of continuous narrative. This reflects a literary language influenced by Russian novels, a blend of time and space. In terms of composition, Ivanov deliberately uses a high vantage point, with figures in the foreground arranged horizontally, ensuring that everyone is “seen.” The protagonist of the painting is no longer the solitary figure of the Messiah, reflecting Ivanov’s affirmation of the self-worth of the citizenry and embodying a humanistic glow. The painting technique Ivanov employs is fundamentally rooted in the classical painting techniques of the European academic school during the Renaissance—the “three-layer method.” [5] However, in his creation, he retained only the coloring process of classical techniques. When depicting Christ’s face, he uses thin, light, and fluid overlay brushstrokes that are not restricted to a specific color, often chosen for their effect. The underlying sketches of Christ’s hands are rendered in a highly generalized manner, retaining only the major contours. To align with the biblical setting of the story unfolding in the Jordan River plain, Ivanov added distant mountains and vineyards with an Eastern flair to the composition and painted a lush, ancient tree on the right side of the canvas. The scenes and figures he depicts do not emphasize any particular brushstroke, texture, or color, reflecting his artistic philosophy: people seem to have no religious beliefs, and everything unfolds as ordinary events in a natural context. [6] The beautiful natural landscapes in “The Apparition of Christ” also foreshadowed the development of Russian outdoor landscape painting in the latter half of the 19th century.

In “Christ Appearing to the People,” Ivanov consciously selects and depicts characters with contrasting identities. This approach is related to the family environment and academic training in which Ivanov grew up, and is based on Aristotle’s classical rhetorical formula, [7] which involves drawing from classical prototypes of predecessors and then arranging them through imitation and contrast, thereby presenting similar themes with different meanings. The primary juxtaposed themes in Christ Appearing to the People are the foreshadowing (Isaiah, John the Baptist) and the fulfillment (Jesus Christ). Additionally, there are other themes such as old and young (the two figures emerging from the water on the left), poor and rich (the wealthy man and the slave), faith and doubt (the four disciples), good and hypocrisy (the believers and the Pharisees), and death and rebirth (the withered branches and dense forest in the upper left corner, John the Baptist and Christ). [8] This approach, filled with contradictions and contrasts, imbues the compositions with underlying tension. The viewer’s perspective shifts from the “halo” above Christ’s head to ordinary people embodying different identities, reflecting secular significance.

Owing to the strong influence of religious forces on the development of Russian painting, Russian historical and icon paintings did not keep pace with the secularization process in Western Europe during the Renaissance. In the 17th century, Russia gradually began to transform icons into religious paintings, which was ultimately completed at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. By the 19th century, with the decline of church art, some painters in Russian secular painting began to focus on Christian themes. Among them, Alexander Ivanov was the most outstanding.

[9] As mentioned earlier, classical rhetoric is fully reflected in Ivanov's works. Although the themes are similar to Raphael's "Transfiguration of Christ" and Poussin's "The Baptism of John the Baptist in the Jordan River," Ivanov, influenced by Strauss and positivism, removed the deified "dove" image and reduced supernatural elements. Faith is no longer tied to the Messiah but originates from the hearts of the people—if you believe that the one coming from afar is the Savior, then that is the case. We can see from the sketch of "Christ Appearing to the People" (No. 7956) housed in the Tretyakov Gallery that Ivanov underwent a torturous process of "contrast." He had also attempted to follow the classical tradition of depicting the "Descent of the Holy Spirit," but ultimately chose the "Appearance of Christ" as the central theme. This was a highly ideological decision, breaking free from the constraints of biblical texts to create an independent artistic vision. A society dependent on divine authority and the worship of monarchs was reimagined as an ideal world in which artists sought to achieve equality between humans and the divine.

The image of Christ presented by Ivanov also carries certain secular symbolic meanings. The spread of Christianity is primarily expressed through artistic symbols such as the figures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, halos, and crosses, while also adhering to the general laws of symbolic meaning production. However, its religious significance is typically linked to theological concepts such as belief in God, veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints, and Jesus Christ's salvation of humanity. [10] In the painting, we can see that Christ's hands are folded together, his expression calm, and he no longer displays any divine gestures. Even Christ's figure is merely a blurred silhouette, and his influence is conveyed through the reactions of ordinary people who witness his appearance on the riverbank. Ivanov emphasizes the moment when the Savior reveals himself to the people and extends the narrative over a prolonged period, depicting the people's profound anticipation of the Messiah. The concept of time seems to vanish from the scenes. Ivanov employs a technique that harmoniously integrates humanity and divinity, capturing a classic and eternal moment, a distinctive approach unique to Russian historical painting.

4. The Influence of "Christ Appearing to the People" on the Development of Russian Historical Painting

Owing to the powerful influence of religion, Russian historical painting did not become secularized during the Renaissance as it did in Western Europe. By the 19th century, political figures were no longer seen as saviors of the people, and the exploitative nature of the tsars could not inspire fervent worship among Russian citizens. Bryullov's "The Last Days of Pompeii" proclaimed that "everyone is a participant in history," while Ivanov, driven by humanistic concerns, created "The Appearance of Christ to the People." Such a religious painting had already diverged significantly from traditional Orthodox iconographies. Ivanov employed a realist style to depict the role of religion in the lives of ordinary people, aiming to present to the audience a process of intellectual liberation, the pursuit of eternal freedom, truth, and light, and the realization of ideals.

Ivanov was a reformer of Russian religious art, overcoming the contradictions of Peter's era and to some extent curbing the development of religion in Russia. The emergence of Christ Appearing to the People marked an important milestone in the transformation of religious art from official academic traditions to a practical art form that reflected modern social, spiritual, and political life. [11] However, Ivanov's attempts also have limitations. The appearance of the Messiah to symbolize human

liberation inherently carries utopian elements. While it reflects the secularization process of Russian historical painting, its essence remains artistic creation rooted in biblical narratives. Seeking solutions to philosophical and social issues through religious themes was clearly unsuccessful in this study. For religion, redemption comes from the meaning of things and actions, not their forms; for art, it is the opposite—it has its own independent means of expression, and its sensory forms inherently possess redemptive value. [12] Regardless, Ivanov played a significant role in advancing the development of Russian historical painting, exerting a profound influence on the critical realist works of the mid-19th to 20th centuries and the artists of the Itinerant Exhibition movement.

Russian historical painting initially transplanted Byzantine culture during the early feudal period, expanded beyond traditional biblical themes by the 17th century, and entered the European artistic development process dominated by “French centrism” in the 18th century, giving rise to a group of indigenous national artists whose realist spirit influenced 19th-century critical realist paintings. This is the developmental trajectory of Russian historical painting, which also reflects the dissolution of the boundaries between historical painting and ordinary painting. Following Ivanov, 19th-century Russian artists increasingly focused on the real lives of people and authentic social environments. “History” was no longer created as an entity transcending “humanity,” and divine religious symbolism was replaced by the resilient national spirit. Russian historical painting emerged as a new artistic genre with a tragic tone, emphasizing realist techniques to metaphorically depict social realities and promote moral consciousness. This was both an “end” and a “new beginning.”

Realist aesthetics encouraged artistic creation to boldly and freely “reconstruct artistic authenticity” through the inner spirit of Christianity, guiding artists to focus on remote rural areas and national traditions and emphasizing social impact over formal constraints. [13] The Itinerant School was dedicated to depicting the true living conditions of the people, reflecting the artists’ strong revolutionary ideals and spirit of struggle, and embodying Russia’s unique national spirit. This was a form of resistance to politics as intellectuals, and also expressed the artists’ faith as ordinary citizens and active revolutionaries. From this perspective, Russian artists’ practices fundamentally transformed the function and nature of historical painting, turning it into a medium for personal emotional expression, imbued with a strong sense of subjectivity. This reflects the collective unconscious of the Russian artistic community. Use a bronze mirror to adjust your attire; use history as a mirror to understand the rise and fall of nations. Use “Russia” as a mirror to clarify one's identity. A nation’s cultural traditions are formed over a long history, shaping the past, giving birth to the present, and nurturing the future. [14]

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Yu, R.S. From Bryullov to Ivanov: The End of Historical Painting and a New Art History. *Fine Arts Research*, 2020, 6, 129.
- [2] I. Dolgoplov. The Birth of Famous Paintings.; translated by Cai Ting, Jincheng Publishing House: Beijing, China, 2010; pp. 408.
- [3] Алпатов, М.В. Александр Иванов. URL (archived on 6.12.2023).
- [4] Ионина, Н.; 100 великих картин.; Вече: Moscow, Russia, 2006; pp. 159.
- [5] Wang, F.Y. A Study of Different Techniques.; Nanjing Normal University Press: Nanjing, China, 2018; pp. 44.
- [6] Ратнер, Л.Н. Русская религиозная и историческая живопись XIX века: А. Иванов, Н. Ге, В. Суриков. URL (archived on 6.12.2023).
- [7] Aristotle. Rhetoric.; translated by Yan Yi, in Miao Litian (ed.): The Complete Works of Aristotle (Vol. 9), Renmin University of China Press: Beijing, China, 2016; pp. 514–517.
- [8] Yu, R.S. The Image of Russia: A Rhetorical Study of Artistic Genres, May ed.; Guangxi Normal University Press: Guangxi, China, 2021; pp. 55.
- [9] Yu, H. Russian Orthodox Iconography and Modernity: A Reflection on Dostoevsky's Iconography. *Journal of Shantou University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2017, 4, 56.
- [10] Xu, J.R. On the Artistic Symbolism of Christ's Gestures in Painting. *Popular Arts*, 2019, 13, 128.
- [11] Цомакион, А.И. Александр Иванов. Его жизнь и художественная деятельность. URL (archived on 6.13.23).
- [12] Zhou, X. Cultural Modernity and Aesthetic Issues.; Renmin University of China Press: Beijing, China, 2005; pp. 292.
- [13] Mei, H.C. Awakening and Prosperity: The History of Russian Art in the Second Half of the 19th Century.; Southeast University Press: Nanjing, China, 2006.
- [14] Guo, X.L. The Totem of Royal Power: An Analysis of Russian Political and Cultural Traditions. *Russian Studies in Central Asia and Eastern Europe*, 2006, 6, 19-23.



© 2025 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)