

## **Cultural Capitals as Reflected in Painting Vienna – Budapest; St. Petersburg – Moscow around 1900**

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The capitals of two great empires, and two other metropolises with strongly “national” features are the focus of the following study. Limitations of space mean that the contrasts drawn here between St. Petersburg and Moscow has necessarily been somewhat simplified. It seems to me, however, that the cultural spectrum of the official Russian capital in the north was less pronouncedly national than that of Moscow, and in this respect it was indeed comparable with Vienna; Moscow, on the other hand exhibited some remarkable parallels with Budapest.

In order to gain deeper insights into the intricate cultural structure of the fine arts in these great cities, we need to examine, firstly, the traditions which they continued to nurture around 1900; secondly, we need to consider the wider international context within which they operated; and, thirdly, we need to look at the agenda of the contemporary cultural elite, as it struggled to create a new, modern identity for an empire and a nation.

The first point to note is that there were major differences in respect of the visual heritage and artistic tradition of these cities up to the 1890s. While Vienna was suffused with the culture of the senses, music, theatre and the visual arts being the focus of its cultural activities, in Budapest the culture of the word literature) was dominant.<sup>1</sup> It was therefore much more difficult for painters to break through the indifference and/or conservatism of the Budapest public in respect of the visual arts than it was in Vienna.

In regard to St. Petersburg and Moscow, the picture is less clear. While in St. Petersburg, together with music, ballet, opera and theatre, literature was an integral part of the artistic scene as cultivated by the intellectual and social elite,<sup>2</sup> the situation in Moscow raises various questions. Were some of the sister arts more favoured here than others? Resolving such issues is crucial to an understanding of the attitude of the public, and of the development of individual artistic genres. It would also help us to identify that elusive chemistry of the cultural scene which profoundly imprints itself on the minds of consumers, creating a discrete image of the city for contemporaries, as for posterity, one that is then absorbed by outsiders. At the level of generalizing clichés, St. Petersburg is known as the capital of the Russian Ballet, a centre for modernizing artistic dance. But what can be said of Moscow? Did it at any point assume the role of capital of the avant-garde?<sup>3</sup> It certainly acquired this status after 1905, but the question is, how did it share this status with St. Petersburg then and thereafter?

Another vital aspect of the local traditions, seen as determining factors in understanding a new period in the fine arts, is the artistic credo of the previous generation, whose concepts, aesthetic principles and styles would have to be overcome, and whose concepts, aesthetic principles and styles had to be called into question or even abandoned. The dominant positions of the preceding painter (mainly the most prominent masters) in the local art scene had to be sacrificed on the altar of the new styles, a new aesthetic and world view. This is what happened in the struggle between the artists of the Künstlerhaus, and the Secession in Vienna; between the Peredvhisniki (especially Repin) and the members of the Mir Iskusstva in St. Petersburg, between the Academic history painters and the Nagybánya group (together with their allies) in Budapest. The details of these developments and their leading actors are different, but the social pattern and its dynamic was the same.

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Secondly, the source of the common cultural characteristics of all four cities is their international geopolitical situation; the artistic elites of Vienna, Budapest, Petersburg and Moscow, all felt that their art scenes were old-fashioned and backward by comparison with the art capital of the world, Paris. They believed they would have to catch up with the western half of the continent, and that therefore they had to absorb as much as possible from French, Belgian, English and German contemporary modernism in art.<sup>4</sup>

Even Vienna (and the Viennese art critics) realized in the early 1890s that Vienna (once a leading artistic centre, also in painting) had become a backwater by that time. After the shock of the 1894 International Art Exhibition in the Künstlerhaus, they changed their policy in respect of marketing and producing art and embarked on organizing regular artistic exchanges, exhibitions etc. to familiarise themselves and the public with the latest styles and trends in the west. The capital of an Empire, a metropolis like Vienna or Petersburg, had to represent its national leadership and brilliance in the visual arts, as in other spheres; and it had to be able to compete internationally in the context of national cultural representation.<sup>5</sup>

The *Zeitgeist* of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century placed the artistic output of any nation as high as its economic advancement, and used it as an indicator of a nation's level of civilization. Not only the academic and artistic, but also the political and economic elites of the states and empires, were well aware of this, and thus acknowledged the importance of the arts for their respective countries. The capital of an Empire, a metropolis like Vienna or Petersburg, had to be able to represent its national leadership in the visual arts, as in other spheres; it had to be able to compete internationally in the context of national cultural representation.

State patronage, the traditional support of the arts by the court and the aristocracy, was now supplemented with, and rivalled by, the increasingly influential sponsorship supplied by the

plutocratic middle-class. Merchants, bankers and industrialists saw support of the arts not only as a prestigious application of their wealth, but also as a contribution to the cultural education of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

The most important venues for this competition between nations in the cultural field were the World Exhibitions (mostly in Paris), the international art exhibitions held in various cities, and the forums for national exhibitions. These were the locations best adapted for any country to construct its artistic identity, to develop its cultural profile, and to embrace simultaneously the local and the international, likewise the traditional or indigenous with the modern, thus ultimately creating something which was undeniably *sui generis*.

The national pavilions at the Paris World Exhibitions (especially in 1889 and 1900) were vital factors in shaping the artistic images of the nations of Europe in the minds of their foreign competitors, and in defining a nation's individual cultural identity. The art sections were crucial for the dissemination of modern stylistic experiments. They inspired individual cultural centres, not only in the efforts of the latter to catch up with everything new and fashionable, but also in their drive to discover their own neglected or hidden national traditions in fields such as ethnography. By the same token, they supplied the impetus for the rediscovery of an earlier artistic period that was regarded as having formed the core of their regional cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup>

Both the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire took great care in composing the arts sections of their pavilions. So also did the Hungarians, who, as a result of their full cultural autonomy in the Age of Dualism (from 1867 onwards), always exhibited separately. They took great pains not to be taken for Austrians, and to avoid the impression that Budapest was a "minor outpost of Vienna". This near-obsession filled Hungarian artists and cultural bureaucrats, especially from the early 1890s onwards, with a passionate desire to create a Hungarian national style par excellence, a style which should be unmistakably unique,

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but at the same time modern. In the international scholarly literature, this impulse is often compared to contemporaneous Finnish national romanticism, which also inspired some of the Hungarian artists and architects of the day.<sup>8</sup>

Thirdly (and oversimplifying slightly) one could say that, in the 1890s, Viennese artists wished to be modern Viennese masters rivalling the French. They tried to stake out Vienna's place on the cultural map of Europe and to justify its claim to be an important and autonomous cultural centre like its rivals, not only in music (where its eminence was not in doubt) but also in the fine arts.

Hungarian artists wanted to create a modern national style sharply differentiated from that of the Austrian/Viennese, and to achieve international fame as an autonomous cultural centre within the Monarchy. In selecting the art works for international exhibition, they emphasised folkloristic elements or motives that were thought at the time to be especially Hungarian.

What about Russia? It seems to be that the Russian artistic elite and the cultural policy of the state followed a similar agenda: certainly Russia showcased the most remarkable artistic achievements of her artists (no matter whether they came from St. Petersburg or Moscow – for example, works of Serov, Vrubel, Korovin, Repin, Nesterov, Levitan etc.). There was a strong desire to demonstrate that the Empire embodied a modern high culture, as well as a unique national style, the latter based on ancient cultural traditions that included elements of Russian folklore. The concept of what constituted the “national landscape” is too large a topic to be embarked upon here, but this too was a vital ingredient in the manner of presenting national identity in the visual arts.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the activities of the various art colonies of the age, whose workshops promoted the revival of folk art and absorbed its stylistic elements into modern design, typically at Abramcevo, Talashkino or the Hungarian Gödöllő, it was still the cities which were the real cradles for the cultivation of the fine

arts.<sup>10</sup> The immense rapidity of industrialization, which reached its apex in Russia in the 1890s, changed many aspects of life in all four cities under discussion, turning their suburbs into modern industrial hells. Industrialisation brought not only the blessings of modern technology and accumulated wealth, but also unprecedented misery in the living conditions of workers, extreme poverty over large areas, and the visual presence of all these phenomena in the suburbs.

How did these four cities cope with this challenge, and how did the visual arts of Modernism/Secession/national style react to the shocking consequences of industrialisation? With hindsight, one sees more differences than common features between the four cities in the ways in which the challenge was met. Generally, however, the 1890s were the years when the dominant cultural and spiritual trends in the arts internationally were Symbolism and the assertion of “*l’art pour l’art.*”

At the turn of the century, there were some painters who were hyper-sensitive to the atmosphere of the cities they lived in, to their traditions and iconic locations, to their *lieux de mémoire* and local colour [ill. № 18.]. Curiously, around 1900 there was a powerful nostalgia in most ancient metropolises for their earlier “golden ages”, and this nostalgia inspired the aestheticisation of the city, rather than the demonization of it. Some painters wanted to depict the city as a beautiful historical place, to discover its special, characteristic vistas, which might often become iconic through mass reproduction in postcards, and later in other visual medias [ill. № 22.]. This special cult of the characteristic monumental buildings, squares or allées of St. Petersburg was actually introduced by painters of the Mir Iskusstva, who rediscovered the beauty of the Petrian Baroque around 1900, and somewhat later the serene beauty of the Neo-Classical city.<sup>11</sup>

The special circumstances of the founding of St. Petersburg, which celebrated its bicentenary in 1904, tied the city to the memory

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of Baroque splendour and aristocratic sophistication, phenomena which also enjoyed an aesthetic revival in other European metropolises. The playful and ostentatious decorativeness of Rococo was indeed quite closely related to French *art nouveau* and to *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism. The cult of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century artistic heritage thus became fashionable among the social elite in Paris and London around 1900, and especially among aristocratic patrons and those painters who worked on stage design. The most important Russian cultivators of XVIII<sup>th</sup> century *sujets* drawn from the Empire's history were Benois<sup>12</sup>, [ill. № 22.] Lanceray, [ill. № 27.] Somov, and even Serov, while Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva<sup>13</sup> depicted the majestic Neo-Classical architectural heritage of the town [ill. № 21, 23.].

Each artist in his or her own way celebrated the beauties of the architectural legacy of the imperial capital with a mixture of affection, nostalgia, admiration and melancholy. There was perhaps only one remarkable master, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky<sup>14</sup> in St. Petersburg who chose to depict the modern, more sinister aspects of the metropolis in all its gloom, the menacing fear and misery of its oppressed under-class, an urban landscape altogether different from the previously aestheticised one, indeed a depiction which featured the losers and victims of industrialised society [ill. № 26.].

In Vienna the cult of the *Veduta* had a very long tradition, and the local patriotism of the Viennese continued to keep it alive. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the Viennese bought innumerable engravings, etchings, watercolours and later lithographs of the sights of their city. The most important chronicler of the topographical nuances of the Danubian metropolis was Rudolf Alt<sup>15</sup> (1812–1905). Over some eighty years, he was never tired of painting the city, especially its great landmark of the Stephansdom [ill. № 17.]. In contrast to St. Petersburg, the preferred vistas of the city were, for him, not the monumental sights but picturesque, intimate views, all of which helped to create an image of intimacy

and charm. As the first honorary president of the Sezession, Rudolf von Alt passed on to a new generation the evergreen task of depicting the favourite sights of the city, its picturesque streets, its parks redolent of local history. This quite sincere love for Vienna was in a way a kind of substitute among artists for assuming a pronounced Austrian *national* identity. Many of the members of the Sezession were anyhow Viennese, but also those who came from elsewhere and settled in the city were soon emotionally overcome by its aesthetic allure, and began to paint it with loving affection (for example, Carl Moll, Alfred Roller, József Divéky). [Ill. No 24–25.]

Apart from the most important historical buildings (which were mainly Baroque) the second and equally favoured artistic age that became the target of nostalgia was the Biedermeier period, whose architecture was a modest bourgeois version of Neo-Classicism. Its cult, combined with that of its music (Beethoven and Schubert) became a permanent feature of the turn of the century Viennese identity. It also supplied a nostalgic ideal for the arts, especially in the field of interior design. It was particularly favoured by the rich middle-class and indeed inspired the functionalist design of the Wiener Werkstätte. “Old Vienna” (*Alt Wien*) was a label applied not only to the local porcelain, but also to the picturesque streets of the inner city; innumerable watercolourists lyrically depicted much-loved sights that had begun to disappear under the pressure of urban modernization.<sup>16</sup>

By the same token, however, to paint the ugly parts of Vienna, the sinister side of life in the metropolis, or to combine its idyllic depiction with social criticism, was totally alien to the Secessionist generation of Viennese artists. Like the members of the “*Mir Iskusstva*” they were worshippers of beauty and indeed in many respects they can be seen as escapists.

Even the next generation, the Viennese Expressionists, who can be seen as emancipators of ugliness, avoided social issues and



focused on the individual, the tortured egoistic psyche whose fate was to be a victim of his instincts, examples of which can be found in the works of Schiele and Kokoschka.

In Budapest, the social situation of the visual arts was very different, as were the attitudes of painters in the Hungarian capital. Although the three cities of Buda, Óbuda and Pest looked back on a two thousand year past, the modern metropolis of Budapest arose only in 1873, when Buda and Pest were united [ill. № 19.]. The city became once more the cultural centre of the whole Carpathian Basin, all of which was Hungarian territory at that time. The newly autonomous Hungarian state decided to build out the capital according to the latest theories of urban design, a transformation that happened very swiftly. By the 1890s, Budapest was a modern and highly industrialised city with only a surviving core of its ancient heritage. This core exhibited a legacy of provincial Baroque and a considerable amount of graceful Neo-Classical architecture; but it lacked the monumentality and luxury of the imperial capitals [ill. № 20.]. Hardly anything was left from the Medieval, Gothic and Renaissance periods. Consequently those painters who sought to reproduce the Hungarian visual heritage of past centuries had to look for it in the countryside. And for the most ancient layers of national culture, as elsewhere in Central Europe, they had to turn to the peasant culture preserved in remote villages.

Budapest as a city had no special cult among Hungarian painters, not least because the entire first generation of modern Hungarian artists studied abroad in Munich and in Paris. On their return, they looked for the genuine Hungarian elements in the countryside and its way of life, and frequently painted the Hungarian landscape with or without accompanying peasant motifs. An anti-urban stance was typical of this generation, which, if depicting urban subjects, preferred to concentrate on the picturesque qualities of small provincial towns rather than the modernity of

the capital. As a result, landscape painting remained for long one of the most popular genres, even for modern artists.

Although most of the exhibitions and the art market were located in Budapest, state patronage also supported provincial art colonies. The artists of such colonies were trying to create a national style that was based on local folk art, even if it was also inspired by the international modern art trends of *fin-de-siècle*, *plein air*, Pre-Raphaelitism, Jugendstil and *art nouveau*. For examples of this mixed inspiration we may look to the production of Nagybánya, Gödöllő, and later Kecskemét.

Together with the paintings of late Historicism and Academicism, such works were selected for international exhibitions as representing the decorative, ethnic heritage of the Hungarian people in a modern interpretation. Just as in Russia, it was in the applied arts where the most remarkable instances of an *art nouveau* national style emerged. Russian parallels would be the production of Abramtsevo and Talashkino, which may be compared to that of Gödöllő.

But what of the cult of Moscow? Were there many cityscapes and *vedutas* painted in the early eighteen-nineties, or did the Neo-Russian style select only the most picturesque sights, focusing on the Kremlin and on a few churches? What forms did local patriotism take within the field of the fine arts, and *veduta* painting? Was there a favourite artistic period taken from the past of the city and resurrected as a lost “golden age” of genuine Russian art?<sup>17</sup> I assume that there was, even if it was tied only to a few outstandingly beautiful buildings, typically churches, monasteries and palaces from the XVI<sup>th</sup> and XVII<sup>th</sup> centuries. At any rate it is the impression of an outsider that the history painting of Surikov paved the way for the Neo-Russian style.<sup>18</sup> It was his work that pioneered the tradition of picturesque *tableaux* evoking XVI<sup>th</sup> and XVII<sup>th</sup> century Moscow, with its colourful costumes, its deep piety and its aura of Byzantine splendour. Some works by A. P. Ryabushkin,

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S. V. Ivanov or even Kustodiev give the impression that they were using the past as a nostalgic escape into aestheticism from a prosaic urban present. It is as if Moscow was loved for its pre-Petrine, medieval past, which seemed to be more “authentic” than the thriving present.

The path of artistic modernity in Russia and in both parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is synchronous. If, for a moment, we lump the achievements of St. Petersburg and Moscow artists together, the inner rhythm of this periodization is surprisingly parallel. The first generation to be inspired by the works of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and the French Symbolists at the beginning of the 1890s (*Jung Wien* in Vienna and *Mereschkowski's circle* in Russia), developed an artistic profile more or less contemporaneously. At the same time, with the help of wealthy patrons, the first exhibitions of national (and even international) importance were organised around 1896–98.

In Russia, the All-Russian Exhibition of Art and Industry in Nizhny Novgorod took place in 1896; in Budapest, the Millennial Exhibition and the founding of *Nagybánya* also took place in 1896, while the Vienna *Sezession* followed in 1897, and the *Jubiläums Ausstellung* in 1898. From 1898 onwards there were several art exhibitions organised each year by the new artists' associations in all four art centres. These shows introduced the leading contemporary modern artists from abroad to the public, as well as showcasing the stylistic experiments of local artists. The period was characterised by a relative tolerance of innovation on the part of the official art establishment, and in respect of state patronage, together with a rapid expansion of an engaged public for art. The pluralistic modern art world nevertheless achieved a kind of national integration. Most of the experimental artists belonging to different trends cultivated a loose institutional alliance, united in their elevation of art to quasi-religious status.

However, in 1905, there was a break in this development everywhere. A new generation of young artists emerged and rapidly

turned against their disillusioned “elders.” They introduced a radicalism which rejected compromises, favouring instead eschatological visions of artistic and social utopias. The art world became very divided: on the one hand it pullulated with feuds between rival groupings, while on the other, its stylistic trends became increasingly international and normative. The influence of the Parisian art scene (e.g. Fauvism and Cubism) now overshadowed regional styles. Like a huge magnet, Paris influenced the compasses of artists all over Europe, and French norms become the criteria for modernism and progress everywhere.

Nevertheless, within these broad outlines reflecting global trends, there was room for a wide variety of individual styles, and each artistic centre boasted a number of uniquely talented masters; such masters managed to synthesize regional traditions and pan-European trends of modernity on a level of artistic quality that is in each case unparalleled.<sup>19</sup> In Vienna there is Klimt and Schiele, in Russia, Vrubel and Serov, in Hungary, Rippl-Rónai and Csontváry, to mention only a few great names. These artists created oeuvres in a totally personal style, actually a sophisticated synthesis of many different aesthetic impulses, one that attempts to offer a differentiated symbolic vision of the world. It is therefore extremely difficult for scholarship to identify an obvious common denominator between the fragmented artistic production of these great masters.

Nor should one forget the great mystical works, for example the symbolic masterpieces of Vrubel, that presented a unique synthesis of national and universal symbols of human fate in terms of enigmatic or ambivalent images, typically those of the “*Swan-Princess*” or the “*Demon*.” When one is confronted with such oeuvres as that of Vrubel or Serov from Russia, or Klimt from Vienna, common denominators may not appear to be very evident. Nevertheless there are points of intersection, some of which betray a similar approach to painterly solutions, and some of which are purely accidental, and thereby inexplicable. One might cite the *fin-de-siècle*

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cult of antiquity, the ancient Greek heritage being a reference point common to all of Europe. This now resurfaced, albeit absorbed into a Nietzscheian interpretation of the Dionysian elements of human instincts, and provided an alibi for reviving the archaic forms of ancient Greek art (as, for example, in the work of a Klimt or a Serov).

If there is anything that could truly be said to be a common denominator between the art of the masters mentioned above, perhaps it is the profound pessimism that broods over their *chef's d'oeuvre*. We see it in the great *Philosophy* of Klimt, painted for the University aula in Vienna, in the *Demons* of Vrubel, or in the *Prophets* of Csontváry. What unites such works is a tragic view of human existence, which is seen as hovering on the brink of the abyss. This is indeed the last generation that tried to create an artistic synthesis on the basis of a common pan-European cultural heritage, aspiring to rescue the values of the latter before the First World War swept them away. The succeeding generation was more optimistic and more merciless; it was determined to start everything anew. May be it did indeed represent those barbarians whom the aesthetes and prophets of decay had feared so much?

Notes

1. From the enormously rich literature, I refer to the pioneering work of Carl E. Schorske (*Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*. Knopf, New York, 1981.), which was followed by hundreds of publications on the culture of the city.
2. “*Mir Iskusstva*” *The Word of Art*. Catalogue, Palace Editions, 1998.
3. Bayer, Waltraud: *Die Moskauer Medici*. Böhlau Verlag, Wien, Köln, Weimar, 1996.
4. Examples of this “*Nachholkomplex*” were the exhibitions organized to introduce foreign artists from Paris, London, Brussels and Berlin and their popularization through the newspapers and journals.

5. Both the Sezession in Vienna and the Mir Iskusstva // St. Petersburg organized exhibitions for foreign artistic groups. Of these, the Sezession twice invited Russian contemporary masters, in November 1901 and in November 1908. The first time the Russians exhibited together with the Scandinavian and Swiss masters, but the second time it was an exclusively Russian exhibition with 192 items on show.

6. In Vienna and Budapest, it was the Jewish plutocracy which contributed a lot to supporting experimental art; in Moscow, it was the few merchant families. See: Kean, Beverly Whitney: *All the Empty Palaces*. Barrie & Jenkins, London, Melbourne, Sydney, 1983.

7. Greenhalgh, Paul: *Ephemeral Vistas*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988.

8. The Finnish artists were appreciated and celebrated both in St. Petersburg, Vienna and Budapest.

9. See: *Russian Landscape. Catalogue*. The Groninger Museum, Holland, The National Gallery, London, 2003.

10. Gellért, Katalin – Keserű, Katalin: *A Gödöllői művésztelep*. Corvina, Budapest, 1987.

11. Petinova, Elena: *The Graphic Culture of the World of Art (Mir Iskusstva) // Mir Iskusstva – The World of Art. E. Catalogue*, Palace edition, St Petersburg, 1998. 171–215.

12. Alexander Benois (1870–1960) painted at first the parks of Versailles before discovering the magic of the St. Petersburg Baroque. In graphic art and in book illustration there was a strong cult of the Rococo everywhere in Europe, which faded away around 1910 only.

13. Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva (1871–1955) was the most faithful and prolific vedutist of St. Petersburg, who worked mainly in graphics; her coloured woodcuts of the different vistas of the canals and places were published on postcards. She pioneered also with eight black and white engravings, for which Diaghilev gave the commission for the Journal *Mir Iskusstva* 1902. She made graphic series of the town even after 1817.

14. Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875–1957), graphic artist and book illustrator who studied between 1899–1901 in the School of Ažbè in Munich and under Hollósy in Nagybánya. He produced shocking expressionist drawings of the revolutionary events of 1905. He was also a very sensitive chronicler of urban misery.

15. Schröder, K. A. – Sternath, M. L. (eds.): *Rudolf von Alt 1812–1905*. Catalogue, Albertina, Vienna, 2005.

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16. Kos, Wolfgang: *Alt Wien – Die Stadt, die niemals war*. Catalogue, Wien Museum, Vienna, 2004.

17. *Moscow Treasures and Traditions*. Exhibition Catalogue. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1990.

18. Nevertheless Surikov painted one of the earliest stunning pictures of the “bronze Horseman”, of the monumental equestrian statue of Peter the Great in a winter moonlight.

19. Howard, Jeremy: *Art Nouveau*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, New York, 1996.