

VERONICA-IRINA BOGDAN

*Museum of Russian Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg*HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI ON THE WORLD
AND INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

The organization of the Russian department at world exhibitions was a matter of importance not only from the economic, but also from the political point of view. It symbolized the prestige of a country, its place in the world. Although for the European powers the economic aspect was the main one, the art department played a significant role. The organization of the art department in Russia was entrusted to the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. All expenses were covered by the Russian government.

The invitations for Vienna World's Fair (*Weltausstellung*) in 1873 were sent to venerable professors and artists Ivan Aivazovsky, Aleksei Bogoliubov, Fyodor Bronnikov, Konstantin Makovsky, Vasily Perov, but also to Academy pensioners Vasily Polenov, Ilya Repin, Pavel Kovalovsky and Henryk Siemiradzki.

Being encouraged by the invitation Siemiradzki wrote to Piotr F. Iseyev, Academy of Arts conference secretary, that the heir's acquisition of the painting *A Roman Orgy from the Imperial Era* had given him the opportunity to tackle the *Christ and the Harlot* (*Christ and Sinner*), which he had been painting for Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich. It was the *Christ and the Harlot* that the artist was going to show in Vienna.¹

1] Russian State Historical Archive, St. Petersburg (= RGIA). Российский государственный исторический архив, Санкт-Петербург, ф. 789, Академия художеств, оп. 8 (1872), д. 55, ч. 2, л. 44. (Fond 789, ser. 8 [1872], rec. 55, 2, f. 44).

Many artists did not have enough time to send paintings to St. Petersburg, as required by the rules. Aivazovsky, working in Florence, asked for a postponement for some artists who were at that time in Italy. He mentioned that “Siemiradzki is painting a beautiful picture”, but it could not be finished by the end of January.²

Only on 10th March 1873, Siemiradzki notified the Board that the picture had been sent to St. Petersburg, asking for permission to be present during unpacking. He asked for the box to be opened only in his presence.³

Christ and the Harlot was the first picture painted in Italy. Compared with the *Roman Orgy from the Imperial Era* – his first picture as an artist, still stylistically sustained in an academic manner – I mean first of all a dark background, *Christ and the Harlot* (fig. 1) was a big step forward. Italy changed Siemiradzki – his palette lightened, which was the result of work in the open air.

Before sending the works abroad, the Academy of Arts decided to make an exhibition in its halls on the Neva embankment and to present the pictures of contemporary Russian art to the Russian public that would be seen by the European audience. Although the *Christ and the Harlot*, both in Russia and later in Europe, was not accepted without reservation, it was highly appreciated. It is indicative that Ivan Kramskoi, an antagonist of Siemiradzki, wrote about *Christ and the Harlot*: “The impression that the picture produces is overwhelming, it extends human capacity of mind, it is painted in a bold and colorful way. One can go mad.”⁴

I want to focus on three points of view to give an idea of the diversity of opinions. Art historian and writer Piotr Petrov in his review wrote that the exhibition in the Academy for the Vienna World’s Fair, did not produce a favorable impression but it changed when two pictures arrived – Siemiradzki’s *Christ and the Harlot* and Ilya Repin’s *Barge Haulers on the Volga (Burlaki)* (1870-1873, State Russian Museum) – “works of fresh, mighty talents”.⁵ This caused an influx of

2] RGIA. Fond 789, ser 8. 1872, rec. 55, 2, f. 106-107 inverse side.

3] RGIA. Fond 789, ser. 8. 1872, rec. 55, 2, f. 166 and inverse side.

4] *Переписка И.И. Крамского. Т.2. Переписка с художниками* (*Correspondence of I.N. Kramskoy, vol. 2: Correspondence with artists*), Искусство, Москва 1954, p. 216.

5] Питер Н. ПЕТРОВ, *Листки на выдержку из портфеля пишущего. Сборник статей П.Н. Петрова из периодических изданий «Биржевые ведомости» и «Нива» 1873 и 1874 г.*, ([yotf]. N. PETROV, *Sheets of clippings from the writer’s briefcase. A collection of small newspaper articles by P. N. Petrov from the periodicals “Brizhevye novosti” and “Niva” 1873 and 1874*), Типография В. Полетики. Санкт-Петербург 1875.

spectators, which was the first encouraging symptom of “improving circumstances in the world of Russian art”.⁶ Lively conversations and discussions between experts began – this also gave hope of increasing the chances of attracting public attention to the Russian department.

Petrov presumed that for the Viennese connoisseurs color played the main role, and Siemiradzki proved to be the best master of color. The most convinced opponents of the artist acknowledged that he, as a colorist, had no equal among other living painters. One could not but be impressed by the courage, freedom and strength of execution, brush technique, which was amazing. The whole scene is very realistic, “brilliant execution” conquers. Petrov recalls that this was the work of a young artist, who had recently graduated from the Academy of Arts. He expressed hope that the audience would go again to the Academy to see these works. Petrov’s conclusion was: “Siemiradzki’s picture would enrich our historical painting”, real connoisseurs would recognize his picture as a part of European art.⁷

As to the audience, it was unanimous in recognizing the painter’s talent. *Christ and the Harlot* brought the author the title of academicians of the Imperial Academy of Arts.

The works of contemporary artists produced over the past 10 years were admitted for the Vienna World’s Fair. The attendance of this World’s Fair was enormous. The Russian pavilion was cramped because of a very large number of sculptures, and it was necessary to change the plan of the exhibition. Siemiradzki’s picture was transferred to the Central Hall. In Vienna Repin discovered that the Russian Department was difficult to find, and Siemiradzki’s picture looked unrecognizable – small, insignificant and even dry (maybe, Carl von Piloty’s influence).⁸ In Repin’s opinion two paintings of Jan Matejko were the best and produced an amazing impression. These words should not be surprising – his friendship with Siemiradzki in the first years at the Academy broke down, they became not only rivals, but also antagonists.

Apollon Matushinsky, another Russian critic, wrote that our department in Vienna was less successful than in London. However, our exhibition caused a great interest and made to respect the Russian school. Our hall, due to the poor placement of paintings and even

6] И. ПЕТРОВ, op. cit. p.70.

7] И. ПЕТРОВ, op. cit., p. 81.

8] RGIA, Fond 789, ser 8. 1872, rec. 55. A 1, f. 384 and inverse side, 385.

worse selection, did not produce a particularly favorable impression. Surprisingly, our collection of paintings, which seemed very good in the halls of the Academy of Arts, in Vienna suddenly lost almost half of its artistic value. “What seemed a model of perfection in St. Petersburg, in Vienna turned colorless and lifeless.”⁹

We see a completely different assessment from Vladimir Stasov. Definitely considering that the choice of works for the Russian Department was good, he still worried. He knew that at home, Russian art was insured against competition. When there is an opportunity to compare with stronger rivals – we become smaller, our achievements did not look obvious. In Vienna, among the tremendously talented pieces of art like Henri Regnault’s *General Prim* (1869, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), strong in historical spirit works by Matejko, he had a feeling of fear. But in the hall of the Russian art fear left him – what looked significant at home the same remained in Vienna. The best and most talented picture, in his opinion was Repin’s *Burlaki*. Of course, this bright representative of the democratic critic, positively evaluated only those works that raised social problems and reflected national identity. Stasov never shared admiration for the classical past, which imbued the work of Siemiradzki, whose aesthetic ideals were deeply alien to him. Moreover, he considered Siemiradzki’s canvases to be even harmful to the Russian public. Therefore, his opinion about the *Christ and the Harlot* should not be surprising: “This a completely external, but still to a certain extent a talented work suffered at the exhibition more than all the other of our paintings. It hanged in the Central Hall too high, together with the paintings too large in size and rather strong in color. Among them, *Christ and the Harlot* suddenly turned completely pale and was enmeshed, and even its good qualities (for example, brilliant though artificial color) disappeared to such an extent that it could not attract attention at all.”¹⁰ As for me, writes Stasov, “Siemiradzki could not belong to the Russian national school, for him it is natural and profitable to join any of the new European schools, for example, Krakow. To belong to it, together with Matejko, Gierymski, Rodakowski and others – is not inglorious. This school has a great future.

9] АПОЛЛОН МАТУШИНСКИЙ, *Отдел искусств на Венской всемирной выставке. «Русский вестник». 1873* (Apollon MATUSHINSKY, *Art Department on Viennese World exhibition*), “Русский вестник” (“Russian Bulletin”), 1873, vol. 108. November, p. 521.

10] Владимир В. Стасов, *Избранные сочинения в трех томах. Живопись. Скульптура. Музыка* (Vladimir V. STASOV, *Selected works in three volumes. Painting. Sculpture. Musik*), vol. 1, Москва 1952, p. 594.

Perhaps, then Siemiradzki, under the powerful and involuntary influence of strong comrades, will create a really remarkable picture.”¹¹

Naturally, at the world exhibitions the artists attracted the attention of critics from different countries. Curious judgment about the Russian department and Siemiradzki had Friedrich Pecht, former Baden historical painter, recognized as the best German art critic. Preferring Repin's *Burlaki*, he wrote about *Christ and the Harlot* that the picture is made with great skill, but the setting was borrowed from the biblical paintings by Horace Vernet. In his opinion the artist understood his task frivolously and naturalistically. The painting was only a talented study of sunlight effects on architecture and people. In another article, entitled *The Ideals of Modern Art*, he mentioned that one could often find caricature of the most sacred topics, among them *Christ and the Harlot* by the Russian painter Siemiradzki.¹²

I'd like to explain his complaints: the Vienna World's Fair was distinguished by the fact that it completely lacked paintings related to biblical and evangelical subjects, previously so highly revered by European artists.

Ernst Lehmann, another critic was benevolent – “As far as we know, Siemiradzki, a young Russian artist, in his *Christ and the Harlot* has proven to be a great colorist; moreover, his way of interpreting biblical material is absolutely new and, perhaps, the only way suitable for religious paintings. Siemiradzki is completely removed from usual monotonous simplicity. His interpretation of the subject has demonstrated that he possessed the historic depth of the sacred legend. Judging by this picture, Siemiradzki will have a great future”.¹³

For Siemiradzki, who had just entered the thorny path of the artist, it was very important to see his works among the paintings of other artists from different countries. Despite the fact that his painting, indeed, was unfortunately hanged, his international debut was a success – his work was noticed, critics wrote about it, the painter was awarded a gold medal “for art”. He was allowed to show *Christ and the Harlot* in Warsaw.

The next international event attended by the artist, was the The Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, in honor of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. There

11] Ibid., p. 595.

12] Ibid., p. 247.

13] Ibid., p. 246.

Siemiradzki showed *Sale of Amulets*, for which he was also awarded a gold medal.

Later, he participated in Melbourne International Exhibition in 1883, where he was awarded a gold medal for the *Isaurian Pirates Selling their Booty*. *Christian Dirce* was shown in 1897 at Venice Biennale in (*Seconda Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte*).

But I want to mark two world exhibitions, which were decisive for him. It was the Vienna World's Fair in 1873 and in Paris in 1878 – *Exposition universelle de Paris*. While the fair in Vienna was his international debut, in Paris it summed up the end of his pension trip period and became an apotheosis. I'd like to underline that Siemiradzki never presented for the world exhibitions the same works, unlike some other artists. Symptomatic that he asked the Petersburg Commission not to send any of his previous works, which are in St. Petersburg in private collections, because “none of them expresses my current views on art.”¹⁴

He showed in Paris three new pieces, among them the most monumental was the *Nero's Torches*. The painting became widely known even in his Roman studio, where a lot of people flocked to see it, especially the artists who were in Rome, among them famous Domenico Morelli and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The first public display of the work took place in May 1876 at the Academy of Saint Luke in Rome and it was triumphant. Siemiradzki was awarded the laurel wreath. Then the picture was shown in Munich and Vienna. In the Spring of 1877 the canvas was finally seen in St. Petersburg, where Siemiradzki was elected Professor. The Council of the Academy noted that all his artistic activity had brought honor to the Academy and Russian art. The picture was on display at the second exhibition of Society of Exhibitions of Art Works, held in the Academy and it was allocated a separate room, which caused a reaction from some artists. So, Paris saw the already famous European painting. What did the French press write?

Émile Blavet believed that the painter was clearly inspired by Victor Hugo's *Nero's Incendiary Song* (“*Amis! Ennui nous tue*”).¹⁵ Another critic, Maurice Vachon, regretted that Siemiradzki had chosen a terrible plot that made him unwittingly unfair to the artist.¹⁶ Referring to the unfortunate places in the painting he criticized the composition.

14] RGIA. Fond 789, ser.10.1876, rec. 225. B, f. 281.

15] RGIA, Fond 789, ser.10.1876, rec. 225.B, f. 406.

16] RGIA. Fond 789, ser.10.1876, rec. 225.B, f. 404 (Feuilleton du Journal des Debats du 13 Juin 1878. Exposition Universelle Beaux-Arts).

In his opinion the main group was not selected, the figure of Nero did not dominate, there were a lot of unnecessary details. He gave preference to two other paintings – *The Vase or the Woman?* and *Shipwrecked Man (The Roman Beggar)*. The critic noted that *Nero's Torches* for the Russian Department was the same as for the Austrians the work of Hans Makart *Entry of Charles V in Antwerp* (1878, Kunsthalle Hamburg). Nevertheless, Vachon was forced to admit he regretted that the two most powerful paintings of the exhibition belonged to the brush of foreigners.

Siemiradzki was awarded the Grand Prix and the order of the Legion of Honor along with a Sèvres porcelain vase from the French government.¹⁷ The artist achieved international recognition: he was elected a member of the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, Rome, Berlin, Stockholm. The Uffizi Gallery ordered his self-portrait. Meantime *Nero's Torches* continued the triumphal procession through European exhibitions.

Having achieved fame most painters could not even dream of, Siemiradzki went on to search for new ideas. “He was a keen observer of colorful effects and a great worker. This educated, proud, reticent man, with a great character and intelligence, did not only rely on his talent, he lived in Rome, working hard” these are words of Mikhail Nesterov.¹⁸

His last big picture, *Christian Dirce*, also provoked fierce debates and attacks by the press in the same way as in his younger years. But in Venice and St. Petersburg, this work gathered crowds of fans and admirers of the artist's talent.

In subsequent years, the artist participated widely in various exhibitions, he held personal exhibitions in Rome and St. Petersburg. The role of World exhibitions in the formation of Siemiradzki as an artist was significant.

17] RGIA. Fond. 789, ser.10.1876, rec. 225.B, f. 533.

18] Михаил В. Нестеров, *Воспоминания* (Mikhail V. Nesterov, *Memories*), Советский художник, Москва 1989, p. 188.