

УДК:

ББК: 85.14

A43

DOI:10.18688/aa166-7-62

Igor Borozan; Tijana Borić

## **In Pursuit of the Sublime: Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky's *Walking upon the Sea* (1849) from the State Art Collection of the Royal Compound in Serbia<sup>1</sup>**

The Royal Compound in Dedinje acquired its shape in the period from 1922 to 1936, when the two main buildings of the Royal and White Palace were built and decorated [2, pp. 57–98]. Like many other state buildings, the Royal Palace in Dedinje also houses an exquisite collection of fine arts. The painting *Walking upon the Sea* by Aivazovsky was registered in the earliest inventory books dated back to 1934 [18, p. 248] (Ill. 150). Researches of the Royal Art Collection are still missing some essential information about its provenance. Many archival documents confirm close contacts of White Russians with the court of King Alexander I and the strong influence of their artists during the Serbian interwar period. Records prove that Alexei Hansen, the grandson of Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, was under the auspices of King Alexander and some of Aivazovsky's works were purchased for the Royal Art Collection [1, pp. 122–125]. Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that the painting *Walking upon the Sea* reached the collection through Alexei.

*Walking upon the Sea* by Aivazovsky from the State Art Collection of the Royal Compound in Belgrade is one of the few examples of religious seascapes within the prolific oeuvre of this important 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian maritime painter [16, pp. 57–98]. With the help of artistic means, the painter revised the literary model based upon the *Gospel of Matthew* (14, 22–34) in accordance with the Romantic pathos of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The universal (archetypal) value of the Biblical narrative matches the general meaning of Romanticism and the determinants of the period, which undoubtedly affected the choice of theme and context of the presented event.

Aivazovsky usually opted for the images of peaceful fishing scenes, or harbors with countless ships indicating the strength and power of capitalist competitiveness, as well as the images of exotic coastal scenes. Additionally, he focused his attention on the documentary depictions of shipwrecks and destruction during historical naval battles [3, pp. 18–19]. Despite these images, the painter's oeuvre is most often associated with pictorial visions of marine disasters with small fishing boats battling with destructive forces, as well as depictions of powerful ships disappearing in the whirl of giant waves.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is created within research project of the Ministry of Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia named Images of Identity in Art and Verbal – Visual Culture of the Modern Age, № 177001

The general theme of marine disasters became a paradigm of Aivazovsky's works [22, pp. 182–187]. The common theme of his monumental seascapes implied a powerful contrast between a human being and elements of nature [12, p. 128]. Helpless shipwrecked figures set in a vastness of the sea suggested how powerless a human being is, comparing to the capricious forces of nature. Left without faith and hope, a miniature individual disappears into the cosmologically determined Universe, thus becoming a mere statist in a tragic staging of the destructive power of sublime nature.

The term *sublime* was introduced into aesthetic categorical dictionary in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century [15, pp. 4–10]. The sublime is essentially defined as human fascination with terrifying images and angry scenes. Dynamic and vibrant experience of the sublime transcends any material sense becoming a paradigm of discovering unconscious aspects of a human psyche. Therefore, the image of a storm becomes one of the key toponyms of the feeling of the sublime. Fear of destructive forces provokes the sense of the aesthetics of the sublime, thus confirming the concept of enjoying the terrible scenes and destructive forces of natural order.

Edmund Burke's treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime* (1757) codified this discomfort in front of the artistic scenes [15, pp. 48–71]. He defined a number of elements that later became program idioms of Dark Romanticism. Fear, uncertainty, obscurity, horror create feelings of despair, pain, and loneliness which are jointly manifested in front of horrifying images.

This painting from the State Art Collection corresponds to some extent to the established typical scenes of marine disasters, somewhat modified due to the particular time and historical circumstances.

As a student of the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg, Aivazovsky visited Italy to finish his education [14, p. 58]. During his trip to Italy (the Grand Tour) the painter visited Naples [4, pp. 203–230], an unavoidable topos of all pilgrimages to southern Italy [6, pp. 135–155]. The city of the sublime pathos was largely defined by the mythical projection of catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 B. C. [4, pp. 236–257]. During his travels across Italy, Aivazovsky must have witnessed the outstanding fame of the notable painting *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Karl Pavlovich Bryullov [22, p. 184]. The Romantic sublime pathos in visual and verbal culture of the epoch coincided with the natural circumstances of the Vesuvius eruption in 1834, which undoubtedly fostered the pathos of horror during the 1830s and 1840s.

The overall feeling of Dark Romanticism rested largely on human subconsciousness [12]. Instability of ideas and oddity of forms had their roots in the unconscious and untested depths of human psyche. In his canonic book *The Romantic Agony* Mario Praz defined the scope of Romantic dark mood [22, p. 184]. Literary sources, largely based on response to Gothic novels, produced a reaction in visual arts. Fear, discomfort and irrationality were visualized by ghostlike images, grotesque phenomena and imaginary creatures corresponding to artistic imagination and creative freedom of Romantics, confirming the eruption of the repressed world of dreams. Nocturnal images united these typical figures in a unique pictorial world of Dark Romanticism testifying to the unique feeling of uneasiness within academic and non-academic art [12, pp. 14–28].

*Walking upon the Sea* embodies the above structural phenomena in media system of Dark Romanticism. At the same time, formal and conceptual framework of this presentation of water

leads us to the key segments of the rhetoric of political semantics [21, pp. 89–126]. From the perspective of political iconography, the storm undoubtedly reveals the relationship between the main structures of the painting [7, pp. 409–415]. As a focal and symbolic center of the composition, Christ is categorically defined in regards to the storm calmed by his presence. In the emblematic political vocabulary, the storm indicates social and political instability, which is usually calmed by a decisive figure of a leader (monarch). The one who restrains the storm brings stability to the community and state, becoming a guarantor of the upcoming period of peace and abundance. Schiller defined a Romantic concept of distinguishing causal, moody and capricious nature, and a human as a moral being with freedom of choice. In his painting, Aivazovsky presents Christ as a paragon of morality, who chooses his fate by calming the unstable world of devastating, immoral nature and setting a human in a free relationship with forces that are seemingly beyond his control. Like a chosen and predestined Romantic genius, Christ enters the whirl of the elemental forces, subordinating them in the name of humanity. By his presence, he sets the apostles free from fear, turning their skepticism and infidelity into hope and faith. Aivazovsky uses the image of Christ and turbulent nature to visualize the essence of Romanticism, sublimed in the paradox of duality. The duality of Romanticism is based on the dichotomy and collision of opposing forces. In this case, the transcendental figure (vision) of Christ and vibrant material nature are the expression of the dialectics of opposites, peace and turbulence. The collision of the opposing energies is resolved, and it is through Christ that Romantic instability is balanced.

Scholars have highlighted a strong correlation of natural disasters and actual political circumstances in Aivazovsky's oeuvre. From this perspective, the seemingly destructive natural forces in the *Ninth Wave*, dated 1850, reveal active political influences pointing to the failure of the Polish Revolution of 1831 [22, pp. 182, 186]. In the eyes of the contemporaries this seascape was transformed into a visual political pamphlet. The prerevolutionary years in European countries must have left a deep trace in the artist's soul. Turbulent political atmosphere in Italy, Germany, Austria and France was undoubtedly to affect the artist who painted *Walking upon the Sea* in the year of the revolution. They coincide with the religious spirit of Millennialism and the faith in the imminent end of the world after a thousand years long Christ's kingdom on Earth [11, pp. 138–139]. Frightening images of wild nature and religious apocalyptic mood are also featured in the artworks of John Martin [11, pp. 125–146].

Through the language of symbols, a message is sent to Russian and European public. Stability and order preserved in Russia, untouched by the revolutionary earthquake became a model of a good government and religious authorities. Christ is interpreted as a religious comforter of the Russian congregation frightened by the revolution. He *enters* people's hearts offering them religious appeasement at the time of considerable religious upheavals. Thoughts about the end of the world, which were undoubtedly fostered by social and political turmoil throughout Europe, threatened to destabilize Russian society. In Aivazovsky's vision, Christ's constancy is turned into a political apologia for the Russian constitutional concept of religiosity and the imperial autocracy [23]. Christ becomes a metaphor for an earthly king who offers a shelter to the people. The small boat with fishermen (apostles) becomes an emblematic metaphor for the state and the Church boat that still floats on rough seas. Stormy sky, gloomy sea and rocky coastline are restrained by the appearance of Christ. It seems that Aivazovsky intentionally

chose the scene where Christ appears a front of the Apostles as a ghost: ghostlike images were popular in the culture of Romanticism. However, Christ quickly calms the apostles with words “*Fear not, for I am with you; do not be dismayed*”. He sets their doubts, the existential paradigm of Romantic skepticism, into the framework of acceptable mystery of walking upon the sea. Christ is seen as a kind of a wizard who acts between the fine line of the acceptable institutionalized Christian faith and mysterious character of the Romantic religiosity. Facial expressions and corporal rhetoric of the presented apostles reveal a state of shock caused by the appearance of a mysterious stranger who walks ghostlike thus confirming the somnambulatory character of the imagination that turns Christian mystery into the Romantic effectiveness.

The nearly phantasmagoric image of Christ is not only the emblematic pictogram, but rather an independent entity, which creates the formal vision of this piece. The image of the Savior acts as a light factor (reflector) that in Aivazovsky’s works was often associated with the image of the Moon. Its luminous aura further emphasizes the academic mastership of the artist. This aura is evident in the depiction of waves and stormy sea. In such masterly parts and precisely executed details, the craftsmanship based on Dutch marine painting reached its climax [14, p. 64]. In foamy waves and shades of dark blue sea, we recognize the accuracy and skillfulness of workmanship, which paradoxically complete the somnambulistic figure of Christ. Christ’s image becomes almost an autonomous art form announcing the impressionist color and light in the artist’s later works.

Aivazovsky used Christ’s figure as a core element in presentation of the apostles in the boat. The bodies of apostles have academic features. The fishermen actively participate in this cosmic landscape image. The painting differs in this respect from the common practice of representing miniature human figures in gigantic scenes of shipwrecks. The presence of the properly set human figures confirms constancy of the academic painting and the presumed credibility of the image. The presentation of the coastline can be interpreted either as a fiction or as drawn from nature. It helps us to decode this complex composition. In the given context, we can observe the presentation of the coastline in the upper right corner. The nuanced rocky coastline, which is shrugging from the dominant section of the sky, could be the real representation of one of the many seas (lakes) that the artist visited during his artistic and scientific trips. The artist’s topographic accuracy, verified by his education and his experience as the official painter of the Russian Naval Ministry, tamed the unrestrained Romantic approach. At the same time, the collapsing coast might be conceived as a fiction, a paraphrase of the Sea of Galilee, where the famous event of Walking upon the Sea took place. During his lifetime, Aivazovsky visited all the major European sea lines [3, p. 17], expending his existing empirical knowledge of water surfaces, which he acquired on the shores of his native city on the Black Sea coast. The craggy landscape is certainly a reminiscence of the event that took place immediately before the meeting of Christ and the apostles on the lake. It symbolically recreates the rocky ground where (after the miracle of multiplication of bread and wine) Christ secluded himself in a prayer. Obviously, Aivazovsky creates a symbolic narrative, and so he creates simultaneous action flow that culminates in the presentation of the sea. Above the rocky coast, a ray of light emerges. It penetrates the prevailing darkness of the left part of the image, thus pointing to the fruitful effects of Christ’s prayer, represented by symbolical light on this mainly dark representation.

The virtuoso treatment of the composition *Walking Upon the Sea* fits into the general readings of Ivan Aivazovsky's oeuvre as the artist sets this image in between mythical, Christian and symbolic (emblematic) interpretation. The documentary character of this image is transformed into presentation of deep feelings and universal values, which makes a historical event processed into the fiction synchronized with intellectual and artistic frames of time. The moral-didactic message did not allow the painter to leave the basic academic postulates (drawing, human figure...), and the picture remains a pictorial example of variations on the theme of the antithetical paradox of Romanticism (classical in artistic form and Romantic in emotional response).

*Walking upon the Sea* can be understood as part of an imaginary triptych that Ivan Aivazovsky created half a decade later. In 1888, the artist painted the image of the same name. In this version, he chose a moment when Peter was drowning for his skepticism and doubts. The following year, Aivazovsky again made the image, in which he represented the culmination of this Biblical story. It is the moment when Christ saves apostle Peter from the rippling water. If the original version of the composition *Walking upon the Sea* was of didactic tone aimed at the transformation of potential addressees, then the two latter eponymous images seemed like the existential visual pamphlet of the elderly artist. The universality of the message and political semantics of the initial painting were abandoned. These images now become representations of a personal relationship between Christ and Peter indicating indirectly to an internal religiosity of the author. The artist's soul turns to the scene of an internal spiritual struggle, which reveals a romantic individual in his perpetual psychological struggle.

However, the author chose to follow the Biblical story bringing the trilogy into a single structural chronotope. Created in a large time span, those three works are connected via formal logic embodied by the use of optical phenomena and appropriate symbolic allusions. Nocturnal pathos of the three compositions confirms the long duration of late Romanticism. It verifies the structural coherence of this art movement based upon conceptual, formal and thematic similarities (meanings), and, primarily, on common feelings.

All the three seascapes are composed with a background constituted of real and fictional elements. The initial episode of the trilogy, the focus of our research, affirms paradigmatic unity between the painter's imagination and the real nature presentation. Fantasying as a process of imagination requires the absence from the direct observation of nature. The process of imagination enlarged the distance between the observer and nature, turning it into a topos of the otherness. From a safe distance, the observer imagines (creates) the landscape that he once saw and then converts it into his own mental image. Undoubtedly, such an action determined the artistic way of thinking for Ivan Aivazovsky as illustrated by the piece *Walking upon the Sea*, dated 1849. The seascape developed into the object of his intellectual and creative fantasy.

The concept of imaginary landscape [20, pp. 174–182] is based upon visionary processing of detailed memories of nature, and *Walking upon the Sea* is a fine example of such a process. According to testimony of Ilya Ostroukhov, landscapes are created on excerpts of memory based on previous exact studies of nature [14, pp. 63–64]. As a result, the painter's impressions of nature combine with his personal feelings and imagination [14, p. 64].

This is the approach that Aivazovsky used in creating his seascape *Walking upon the Sea*. Beyond the limits of nature, but still a part of it, the painter presented the biblical theme appropriate to the visionary spirit of the time. Shaped as artificial and aestheticized space, the

seascape became a field of the artist's anthropomorphic projections. The Romantic sublimity and sensitivity of the artist interlaced with cultural and ideological frameworks of the period. His reflections of the political and social events were transformed into the timeless story with biblical roots. This story expresses the universality of the message of suffering and salvation. Therefore, the seascape became a projection of a contemporary man, his complex attitudes towards religion and nature, his place in the mysterious Universe [10, pp. 1–18]. Finally, the painting *Walking upon the Sea* from the State Art Collection in Belgrade demonstrates the artist's virtuoso technique and his craftsmanship perfection. It confirms the strength of the artwork as a visual stereotype that further testifying social, ideological, cultural and artistic practices of the mid-nineteenth century Europe and Russia.

**Title.** In Pursuit of the Sublime: Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky's *Walking upon the Sea* (1849) from the State Art Collection of the Royal Compound in Serbia

**Authors:** Igor Borozan — Ph. D., assistant professor. University of Belgrade, Čika Ljubina 18-20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia. borozan.igor73@gmail.com

Tijana Borić — Ph. D., assistant professor. University of Niš, Kneginje Ljubice, 10. 18000 Niš, Serbia. tjanaboric@hotmail.com

**Abstract.** The indescribable idea of the sublime fascinated and challenged the famous nineteenth century artist Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, whose dwelling upon this concept gave rise to countless visual responses. In this paper, we examine the earliest known version of his piece known as *Walking upon the Sea*, dated 1849, from the State Art Collection of the Royal Compound in Serbia. This particular image is a peculiar combination of the stormy sea at night and religious theme that embodies the artist's inner self-observations, thoughts, worldview, and the perceptive power of the years to come. Aivazovsky was a man of Romanticism and a visionary genius as well. He was occupied with the ideas of infinity, great drama and of the divine that challenges viewers' senses of space and time. *Walking upon the Sea*, the art piece of its time, is a manifest reflection of skepticism of the era, groundbreaking experiments, innovations, and discoveries.

**Keywords:** Aivazovsky; Romanticism; sublime; skepticism; emotional tuning; deification of nature.

**Название статьи.** В поисках возвышенного: «Хождение по водам» И. К. Айвазовского (1849) из Государственного художественного собрания Королевского дворца в Сербии.

**Сведения об авторах.** Борозан Игорь — Ph. D., ассистент. Белградский университет, Чика Любина, 18-20, 11000, Белград, Сербия. iborozan@f.bg.ac.rs

Бориц Тьяна — Ph. D., ассистент. Нишский университет, Кнегинин Любиче, 10, Ниш, Сербия, 18000. tjanaboric@hotmail.com

**Аннотация.** Не поддающаяся словесному выражению романтическая категория «возвышенного» увлекала и искушала знаменитого художника XIX столетия Ивана Константиновича Айвазовского. Свои размышления о нем он воплотил в многочисленных визуальных образах. Статья посвящена самому раннему известному варианту его картины «Хождение по водам» (1849), которая недавно была вновь открыта и представлена после реставрации и консервации в Государственном художественном собрании (Королевский дворец, Белград). Предложена попытка анализа этой своеобразной работы, в которой ночной пейзаж штормящего моря неожиданно стал выражением религиозной темы, поданной сквозь призму внутреннего мира художника, его мыслей, мировоззрения и провидения о грядущих годах. Айвазовский был человеком эпохи романтизма и гением-визионером. Его думы волновали понятия «бесконечного», «божественного», «великой драмы», которые ломали традиционное восприятие пространства и времени в изобразительном искусстве. «Хождение по водам» — произведение своей эпохи, отчетливо отразившее скептицизм эры революционных научных открытий и экспериментов. Большое внимание в статье уделено особенностям картины, свидетельствующим о стремлении художника настроить эмоции зрителя, и художественным приемам, с помощью которых он достигает нового драматического эффекта. Кроме того, предпринята попытка объяснить выбор религиозной темы, очевидно несовместимой с романтическим мировоззрением, и выявить, как она соотносится с категорией «возвышенного». Впоследствии Айвазовский вернется к этой теме по меньшей мере дважды. В заключение приведен анализ символического языка художника и средств,

кокоторые он использовал, чтобы настроить свой внутренний взор для претворения реальности в художественные образы своих произведений.

**Ключевые слова:** И. К. Айвазовский; человек эпохи романтизма; категория «возвышенного»; скептицизм; эмоциональное содержание; обожествление природы.

## References

1. Acović D. etc. *Slika ruske duhovnosti u Kraljevskom dvoru (The Image of the Russian Spirituality in the Royal Palace)*. Beograd, Kraljevski dvor Publ., 2013. 32 p. (in Serbian).
2. Babac D. etc. *Dvorski kompleks na Dedinju (The Royal Compound in Dedinje)*. Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva Publ., 2012. 285 p. (in Serbian).
3. Böhme H. Traditionen und Formen der aquatischen Ästhetik in der Kunst Iwan Aiwasowskis. *Aiwasowski. Maler des Meeres*. Ostfildern, Hatje Caentz Verlag Publ., 2011, pp. 15–35 (in German).
4. Brajović S. *Njegoševo veliko putovanje. Meditacije o vizuelnoj kulturi Italije (Njegoš's Great Journey. Meditations on Visual Culture in Italy)*. Podgorica, Institute for Language and Literature "Petar Petrović Njegoš" Publ., 2015. 316 p. (in Serbian).
5. Brugger I.; Kreil L. (ed.) *Aiwasowski. Maler des Meeres*. Ostfildern, Hatje Caentz Verlag Publ., 2011. 168 p. (in German).
6. Cardinal R. *Romantic Travel. Rewriting the Self. Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*. London — New York, Routledge Publ., 1997, pp. 135–155.
7. Donandt R. Sturm. *Handbuch der poltischen Ikonographie, Bd. II: Imperator bis Zwerg*. Munich, Verlag C. H. Beck Publ., 2011, pp. 409–415 (in German).
8. Gardner Coates V.; Lapatin K.; Seydl J. L. (eds.) *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum Publ., 2012. 256 p.
9. Holms R. Doba čuda: kako je pokolenje romantičara otkrilo lepotu i užas nauke. Beograd, Dosije Studio Publ., 2011. 572 p. (in Serbian).
10. Kohle H. *Arnold Böcklins Halluzinationen Malerei im Zeitalter der Psychologie*. Kunstgeschichte. Open Peer Reviewed Journal, 2009. Available at: <http://www.kunstgeschichte-ejournal.net/98/> (accessed on 23 March 2016) (in German).
11. Kohle H. Katastrophe als Strategie und Wunsch. Englische und deutsche Landschaftsmalerei des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts. *AngstBilderShaulust. Katastrophenerfahrungen in Kunst, Musik, und Thetaer*. Berlin, Henschel Publ., 2007, pp. 125–146 (in German).
12. Krämer F. (ed.) *Dark Romanticism. From Goya to Max Ernst*. Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag Publ., 2009. 304 p.
13. Prac M. *Agonija romantizma*. Beograd, Nolit Publ., 1974. 459 p. (in Serbian).
14. Samarine I. Die Welt im Licht einer Laterna magica des Ostens. Iwan Aiwasowskis Stellung in der russischen und europäischen Kunst. *Aiwasowski. Maler des Meeres*. Ostfildern, Hatje Caentz Verlag Publ., 2011, pp. 51–66 (in German).
15. Shaw P. *The Sublime, the New Critical Idiom*. London — New York, Routledge Publ., 2006. 168 p.
16. Shumova M. N. (ed.) *Russkaia zhivopisn pervoi poloviny XIX veka (Russian Painting of the First Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century)*. Moscow, Iskusstvo Publ., 1978. 168 p. (in Russian).
17. Tarasov O. *Icon and Devotion. Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*. London, Reaktion Books Publ., 2002. 448 p.
18. Todorović J. *Katalog državne umetničke kolekcije Dvorskog kompleksa u Beogradu I. Evropska umetnost (Catalogue of the State Art Collection in the Royal Compound in Belgrade I. European Art)*. Novi Sad, Platoneum Publ., 2014. 307 p. (in Serbian).
19. Vasić R. *Konzervatorsko-restauratorski radovi na slici Hrist hoda po vodi ruskog slikara Ivana Konstantinoviča Ajvazovskog*. Available at: [http://www.heritage.gov.rs/cirilica/Download/Katalog\\_sa\\_izlozbe\\_dani\\_ruskih\\_duhovnih\\_slikara.pdf](http://www.heritage.gov.rs/cirilica/Download/Katalog_sa_izlozbe_dani_ruskih_duhovnih_slikara.pdf) (accessed on 27 January 2016).
20. Vaughan W. *Romanticism and Art*. London, Thames and Hudson Publ., 1978.
21. Warnke M. *Political Landscape. The Art History of Nature*. London, Reaktion Books Publ., 1994. 168 p.
22. Wessolowski T. Naturkatastrophe. *Handbuch der poltischen Ikonographie, Bd. II: Imperator bis Zwerg*. Munich, Verlag C. H. Beck Publ., 2011, pp. 182–187 (in German).
23. Wortman S. R. *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas*. Princeton — New Jersey, Princeton University Press Publ., 2000. 512 p.



Илл. 148. Ян ван Хухтенбург.  
Батальная сцена.  
Нач. XVIII в. Челябинский  
государственный музей  
изобразительных искусств



Илл. 149. Ян ван Хухтенбург.  
Битва при Рамильи между  
французами и союзниками  
23 мая 1706 года. 1706–1710.  
Рейксмузеум, Амстердам



Илл. 150. И. К. Айвазовский.  
Walking upon the Sea. 1849.  
The State Art Collection of  
the Royal Compound in  
Dedinje, Belgrade, Serbia