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## The “Shikotan Group” and Two Tendencies of Soviet Landscape Painting

Starting since the mid-1960s, groups of young artists from Moscow and the cities of Vladivostok and Ussuriysk in Primorsky Krai visited Shikotan Island almost every year until 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved. Shikotan belongs to the southern part of the Kuril Islands, which is an important center for Russian fisheries. Its sovereignty, however, has been claimed by the Japanese government. The leader of these young artists was Oleg Loshakov (born 1936), who studied at the Surikov Art Institute in Moscow (Ill. 163). Soon after his graduation, Loshakov was sent to the developing art school in Vladivostok. He became acquainted with local students of his age and socialized with them in such a profound way that, after his two-year assignment at school between 1960 and 1962, Loshakov temporarily travelled back to Vladivostok to share time with them and to work together sketching outdoor landscapes in and around the city. But he was also eager to know places he had not visited yet. He started to go around the Russian Far East with one of his pupils, Vladimir Rachyov, and on the advice of Ivan Chuikov — one of his colleagues in Vladivostok, whom Loshakov met by chance at the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk airport — went to Shikotan. This island immediately fascinated him for its beauty of land and sea, and would eventually have a decisive influence on his artistic career. In fact, he regularly commuted from Moscow to Shikotan to stay on the island for several months during summer. More than 30 artists joined him in Shikotan, and Loshakov visited this island twenty-three times in twenty-six years from 1966 to 1991. Loshakov claimed that even though many Soviet artists used to travel and depict the landscapes in similarly remote places (such as the White Sea, Arctic North, Siberia, Chukotka, Caucasia or Central Asia), only the “Shikotan Group” was named as such, since they were recognized as the distinctive group, who continued their activity for many years and maintained their artistic ideals and high quality<sup>1</sup>.

The group’s perennial activity resulted in a successful, national-level exhibition held in Moscow in 1980 [8]. A stylized form of the natural landscape was represented on the poster of the exhibition (Ill. 164). It was in the form of the double volcano, Mt. Tyatya, in which the pointed summit of the mountain protruded from the caldera. In fact, this characteristic form of the volcano became the symbol of the Shikotan Group. Mt. Tyatya is located on Kunashir Island, and can be clearly seen from the Bay of Malokuril’skoe of Shikotan Island. The landscape combination of a bay and a volcano was a frequent subject, and I think the painters of the Shikotan Group created the depiction of this “type” of landscape, which was recognizable

<sup>1</sup> This information is based on an interview with Oleg Loshakov of June 2, 2007.

as specifically representing the area (Ill. 166) [20]. It is very curious that this typical landscape resembles one of the most preferred scenic views of Europe: the Bay of Naples with Mt. Vesuvius in the background. Furthermore, some Russian painters, such as Aleksandr Ivanov, depicted this scenery in an idyllic way. Here I would argue that, being represented in such a way, Shikotan Island and the surrounding area has become a part of Europe, at least in the collective imagery of the Soviet Union [20].

Now we turn our eyes to other kinds of paintings by the group. The fishery factory in Malokuril'skoe and its workers were favorite subjects for the artists. For example, Iurii Volkov's *Girls of Malokuril'skoe* was published repeatedly in journals and magazines, and became a kind of visiting card for the Shikotan Group [6, p. 2; 2, p. 59]. Loshakov's portrait shows a type of female worker (Ill. 165), which is comparable to Erik Rebane's work, *Into a New Life: Virgin Lands*, conserved in the Fleischer Museum Collection [3, pp. 325–326; 16, pp. 42–53]. The Fleischer Museum, in the State of Arizona, is now closed, but it played an important role in revaluing the so-called “Soviet Impressionist Paintings”, along with the Springville Museum in the suburb of Salt Lake City, Utah, and the Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis in the State of Minnesota [13, 16, 18]. I will not analyze the state of research regarding Soviet Impressionism here, but I would only like to note a significant difference in style. Rebane's young woman reflects light entering from a window, and her complexion, hair, and clothes are depicted with minute and subtle touches. The atmosphere is brilliant, filled with hope for her future and the future of society. On the other hand, Loshakov's woman is depicted with broad and rough strokes; consequently the effect of the painting surface prevails over the effect of light and shadow. The same things can be said for landscape paintings. Loshakov was very sensitive to the sudden change of weather in Shikotan, which held special fascinations for him (Ill. 167). But his works are very different from those of Soviet Impressionists, such as Nikolai Tolkunov's *Bear Mountain, Koktebel, Crimea*, or Pyotr Kostinski's *Morning at Gurzuf*, in which we can see the invariable light filling the scenes, and the reflection on the surface of the sea shows more limpidness than in the paintings of Loshakov [17, pp. 158–159]. Even the most successful Iurii Volkov's *Girls of Malokuril'skoe* does not have the bright, shining characters of the scene represented by Soviet Impressionist paintings, such as in the works of Nikolai Ovchinnikov's *On the Threshing Floor*, or Zoia Popova's *Good Catch* [16, p. 139; 17, p. 174]. In sum, the Shikotan Group should be categorized into the current, the so-called “harsh (or severe) style” (суровый стиль), an alienated, subordinate branch of Socialist Realism<sup>2</sup>. But the leader, Loshakov, and his followers must have believed that they were acting in the mainstream of the official current of art.

Indeed, in some aspects, they were paradoxically much more similar to the Soviet Impressionists than to representative Russian painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Aleksei Savrasov, Arkhip Kuindzhi, and Isaac Levitan, contributed to formulating the imagery of Russia, but their landscapes with vast plains and large rivers were different from those of Kuril Islands. Alexandr Ivanov, whose work I cited as the most comparable example to the landscape of Shikotan, lived in Rome for almost all of the time during his career and sketched landscapes around Rome and Naples, such as those of Via Appia, Albano, Tivoli, Agro Pontino, Torre del Greco,

<sup>2</sup> Shikotan Group is categorized almost unanimously as this current of realism by the critics, which I agree with.

Castellamare di Stabia, and more. Most of them are in collections of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. These typical landscapes of the Mediterranean coastal regions would have inspired Russian and Soviet art students or professional painters from later generations, like Oleg Loshakov, to compose similar kinds of landscapes for various regions of the Soviet Union. But I would say it was not in a direct way, but through the landscapes of Crimea represented by the Soviet impressionists, such as Nikolai Tolkunov or Petr Kostinski.

At the first step, the landscape of Italy or typical Mediterranean scenery is repeated in a rather unaltered way to represent views of Russia, and to create or invent the types of Russian landscapes. We can see this in the paintings of Semyon Shchedrin's *Noon (View in the Surroundings of Lake Nemi)*, and the *View in the Surroundings of Staraia Russa*, which are both in the collection of the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg [15, pp. 26–27]. Then, Semyon Shchedrin's nephew, Silvestr Shchedrin, who also depicted the typical landscape of Naples with the combination of a volcano and a gulf, represented the coast of Capri Island and the Bay of Amalfi (which are still famous tourist sites) in such a way that the bluff looks impressively rocky [15, pp. 62–69]. We have a similar example from a later generation in the works of Ivan Aivazovskii, who is a very popular artist on the national level. He was Armenian but born in Feodosia, Crimea, and active there for almost all of his life. He contributed to the birth of the Russian seascape painting, transforming the Black Sea into a Romantic ocean. His works are too particular for our argument, so I would like to take as an example the works of Aivazovskii's disciple, Lev Lagorio. Also from Feodosia, Crimea, he too went to Italy to stay for several years, and became a professor at the Art Academy in St. Petersburg. He depicted Mt. Vesuvius and the bay of Naples as other Russian artists have done, and also the Island of Capri. What seems very important to me is the fact that Lev Lagorio found the same kind of Mediterranean landscape in Crimea. We can compare the cliff of Capri Island, and Ayu-Dag from Alushta, both of which he depicted [15, pp. 138–141]. Here, I believe I can say that Russian artists discover the nature of Crimea through their eyes and reveal it to their viewers, who can then experience the beauty of Mediterranean. Furthermore, they invented one of the typical landscapes of Russia.

To understand the process of assimilation of the Mediterranean landscape, or the invention of a Mediterranean-like landscape of Crimea, the historical background should be taken into consideration. The Crimean peninsula, facing the Black Sea, is the innermost part of the Mediterranean, and it was integrated into the Russian Empire in 1783 by Catherine the Great after many vicissitudes. Ancient Greeks and Romans, Medieval Genoese, and the Ottomans since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, had ruled there, and maintained maritime characteristics of the region. Russians gave Greek-like names (Feodosia, Sebastopol, etc.) to some towns, and “re-mediterraneanized” the Crimea. Finally, it was through the Soviet Impressionists that the landscape of transnational imaginaries on a Mediterranean horizon was created.

Crimea was “re-mediterraneanized” by Russian expansionist politics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and represented by the Russian and Soviet Impressionists as assimilable images to those of typical landscapes of the Mediterranean. The typified compositions of Mediterranean landscapes claim that the pictorialized places belong to Europe, which has always sought to portray itself with Mediterranean imageries. The artists of the Shikotan Group, even though they

are classified as the “harsh (or severe) style”, represented the edge of the world, like the southern Kuril Islands, as if it was a part of Europe, introducing the composition available to Russian and Soviet Impressionists.

**Название статьи.** Шикотанская группа и две тенденции развития советского пейзажа.

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**Аннотация.** В середине 1960-х гг. молодые художники из Москвы, Владивостока и Уссурийска образовали Шикотанскую группу, названную так в честь острова, куда они приезжали работать летом и где создали тысячи пейзажей. Их деятельность продолжалась до 1991 г. — группа исчезла вскоре после крушения коммунистического режима. Шикотан входит в состав южных Курил в Охотском море. Очарованные живописными дикими побережьями и холмами, красотой молодых работников рыбозаводов, художники создали в пейзажах со спокойными заливами и характерным абрисом двойного вулкана на горизонте идиллический образ природы острова. Одна из картин Олега Лошакова *Шикотан, залив Малокурильское* (на первом плане на ней представлен залив, а в отдалении — вулкан Тятя на острове Кунашир) напоминает виды Неаполя, города, который был неперменным пунктом «гранд-тура» по Европе и имел особенное значение для русских художников девятнадцатого столетия. Цель статьи — осветить деятельность Шикотанской группы на основе исследований, проведенных на месте, а также интервью с художниками, в том числе с лидером группы — Олегом Лошаковым. Предпринята попытка определить особенности их стиля посредством сравнения с таким направлением, как «советский импрессионизм» (термин, недавно вошедший в употребление и особенно популярный в среде американских коллекционеров).

**Ключевые слова:** Шикотанская группа; Владивосток; Олег Лошаков; пейзаж; советский импрессионизм; Средиземноморье; Крым; Дальний Восток.

**Title.** The “Shikotan Group” and Two Tendencies of Soviet Landscape Painting.

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**Abstract:** In the mid-1960s, young Russian artists from Moscow and the cities of Vladivostok and Ussuriysk in Primorsky Krai formed the Shikotan Group, named after the island where they summered for months at a time and created thousands of landscape paintings. Their activities lasted until 1991, when the group disappeared soon after the demise of the communist regime. The area including Shikotan Island forms the southern Kuril Islands in the Okhotsk Sea. Fascinated with the wilderness of Shikotan's picturesque sea coasts, rolling hills and beauty of young women-workers of the largest fish factory in the Far East of Russia, the artists represented Shikotan's landscape idyllically, with a tranquil bay and a distinctive form of a double volcano. A particular composition (for example, Oleg Loshakov's *Shikotan, the Bay of Malokuril'skoe*) comprising a bay in the middle plane and a distant view of the volcanic Mt. Tyatya on Kunashir Island, recalls views of Naples, an unmissable stop on the Grand Tours of Europe, especially for nineteenth-century Russian artists eager to work abroad. This paper intends to reconstruct the Shikotan Group's activities based on field research and interviews with the artists, including the group's leader, Oleg Loshakov. Further, it aims to describe the characteristics of the style of their paintings, which can be well-illustrated by comparing with the so-called “Soviet Impressionist Paintings,” a recently-coined definition, favored especially by American collectors.

**Keywords:** Shikotan Group; Vladivostok; Oleg Loshakov; Landscape Painting; Soviet Impressionism; Mediterranean; Crimea; Far East.

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Илл. 161. Энтони Гормли.  
Внутри Австралии. 2002–2003.  
Озеро Баллард, Австралия.  
© Photo by Amanda Slater



Илл. 162. Энтони Гормли.  
Поле горизонта. 2010–2012.  
Австрийские Альпы.  
© Photo by Böhrringer Friedrich



Илл. 163. Oleg Loshakov,  
photographed  
on June 2, 2007



Ill. 164. The poster of the exhibition "Khudozhniki na Kurilakh (Artists in the Kuril Islands)", 1980



Ill. 165. Oleg Loshakov. Portrait of a Female Worker. 1970s. Collection of the artist



Ill. 166. Oleg Loshakov. Shikotan, the Bay of Malokuril'skoe, 1989–1995. Collection of the artist



Ill. 167. Oleg Loshakov. Ocean Breeze, 1987. Collection of the artist