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## DEVELOPMENT OF THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF ART IN THE CONTEXT OF EMIGRATION TO CHINA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

**R**ussian Émigré Art is now regarded as an integral part of Russian culture. The art of émigrés to the Far East (i.e. China) has been studied less in comparison with European emigration. China was not a main centre for émigré art (more precisely, it was its periphery). Artists did not tend to come to China; they went there due to some particular circumstances. Among them there were no outstanding or prominent people who defined the future of art. They were professionals of the second class or, even more likely, of the third class.

According to data from various sources<sup>1)</sup> about 130 Russian emigrants worked professionally in the sphere of the fine arts in China during 1920–1948. Two main centres were the focal point of the Russian artists: Harbin and Shanghai. (Some Russian artists also lived in Hong Kong, Beijing, Tianjin, but in these Chinese cities the activity of the Russian diaspora wasn't so widespread). About half of the Russian artist-émigrés living in China received a standard education in art. Twenty-five people studied in the best schools of Russia: Petersburg Academy of Arts, Moscow School of Painting, Sculpturing and Architecture and Stroganov School of Industrial and Applied Arts. Ten people studied art at the School of Industrial and Applied Arts of Yekaterinburg, Chita and other

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<sup>1)</sup> Zhiganov (1936); Kradin (2009); Leykind (2000); Khisamutdinov (2000); Khisamutdinov (2002).

Russian cities. Ten artists sought tuition in different schools around Europe and the USA.

The Russian community was active and capable. Artists organised art exhibitions, carried out big projects in building churches, painting frescos and icons as well as some installations for the monument to A.S. Pushkin in Shanghai. They united in associations with a particular program and strategy of activity (“Ponedelnik (Monday)”, “The Association of Artists, Writers, Actors, Musicians “HLAM” and others). The program included items which showed that the Russian artistic intelligentsia understood its own mission within the context of emigration: 1. the preservation and development of the traditions of one’s own culture; 2. its recognition as an integral part of the entire Russian culture (including emigration to Europe and Soviet Russia); 3. tolerance to different artistic streams 4. openness to the influences of other cultures.<sup>2)</sup>

M.A. Kitchigin and V.S. Podgursky became the most well-known art teachers of “Russian China”. M. Kitchigin<sup>3)</sup> taught drawing in Harbin city schools, in a private arts studio named “the Lotus” founded by Russian emigrants and in his own studio. The contingent of pupils was international: Russian, Europeans, Chinese. Among his pupils there were artists who became professionals and gained recognition in Russia, the USA, France: V.M. Arnautov, L.V. Vertinskaya (Tsirgvava), V. Gorovaya-Leshchenko, T.P. Zhaspar (Filipova), G.V. Tretchikov, M.J. Shchirovsky. The artist V. Podgursky taught in the Chinese Public University in Shanghai (1920–1922), in Shanghai College of Fine Arts (1924–1929) and for several years in Shanghai Art Club. Pupils: K.K. Kluge, A.A. Yaron.

The school predetermined a professional level of painting and drawing. A “breakthrough” in art didn’t happen, but in China the Russian artists found themselves in a different cultural environment, under the strong influence of Orientalism. The local reality such as the environment, population and

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<sup>2)</sup> From the Program of the Association “Ponedelnik” (“Monday”).

<sup>3)</sup> Kitchigin Michael Alexandrovich (1886–1968) was born in the village in the Ural Mountains Region. He learned art in Moscow: at Stroganov School of Industrial and Applied Arts (the head of the diploma was F.O. Shehtel) and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpturing and Architecture (teachers: A.E. Arhipov, S.V. Ivanov, K.A. Korovin, A.M. Vasnetsov). He started to work as an artist in 1916–1917. In 1918 M. Kitchigin fled the revolution to his native place in the Ural region, and in 1921 with the withdrawing White Russian army he came to Harbin (China). In 1928 he moved to Shanghai. M. Kitchigin became one of the most authoritative figures of the Russian cultural community in Harbin and especially in Shanghai. In 1947 M. Kitchigin returned to Russia as a repatriate. From 1948 he lived in Yaroslavl, taught in the Yaroslavl Art School. Most of his art works are now kept in the Yaroslavl Art Museum.



culture of China was so attractive for artists in terms of its fresh area, light and colour that the first desire was just to paint whatever the eye saw. It did not require any transformation of form. Therefore, they cultivated figurative, realistic styles which were close to nature in different degrees: neocad- emism, naturalism, late impressionism, stylization, salon art. Nor did they lack ethnographic or oriental elements. The Western culture (American and English) also influenced Russian emigrants particularly in such a multi-ethnic metropolis as Shanghai. The art of 1930–1950 (the period of activity of Russian emigrants in China) gravitated toward figurative styles, stability, and contact with an audience in different regions such as Europe, the USA, and the USSR. “Russian China” was no exception since it was developing under the strong influence of the art market.

The portrait became the most popular genre of fine art. The portrait drawing style was probably born from academic study. Training expanded to embrace creative work and a theme which could be named *the Faces of China* or *China in Faces*. Over the years, artist-émigrés created dozens of portraits to represent the Chinese population. (M. Kitchigin, *Sing-song girls. Harbin* (1920s) (Fig. 1), *The Salesman* (1930), *Family dinner* (1930) (Fig. 2), *The Old calligrapher* (1937), V. Kuznetsova *The old man with a pipe* (1937) (Fig. 3), *The Monk* (1939)). They can be classified as types. The artists revealed typical features of ethnicity, class or profession. But the portraits are not “faceless”. Each of them has its own individuality: a real person with his own destiny, character, and feelings. Therefore they could be called portraits of certain people imbued with typical features.

In China, Russian artists re-appropriated sanguine for themselves. Soft brown chalk, flexible and pliable in skilful hands facilitated work with a line, a spot, quickly, and gave a successful result. The ochreous tone of sanguine is close to the colour of a human body. In China this drawing technique splendidly suited the images of the local population, the “yellow” race.

The technique of drawing with sanguine isn’t new. Old masters of the Renaissance, artists of the academic school loved to work with sanguine and char coal. M. Kitchigin gave academic drawing a new artistic impulse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inherent in his own vision. In his work, his individuality was revealed in the form of internal energy, a way of generalising nature, a well-crafted composition. All the drawings are of a large size, almost full-scaled. They are close to nature, however without cross the line separating nature from naturalism. M. Kitchigin never strove for photographic similarity, never copied a model mechanically, but instead he understood the necessity for art generalisation.



Victor Stepanovich Podgursky<sup>4)</sup> was one of the most outstanding public persons in the artistic life of Shanghai. He became a grand master of genre scenes reflecting the peculiarities of Chinese life. V. Podgursky dextrously captured amusing moments of life: *To the market* (1937) (fig. 4), *Street restaurant* (1930s) (Fig. 5), *Cheap sale* (1930s), *The street barber* (1938). Academic drawing was at the base of his works. Naturalism in a rigid manner gave his drawings the character of photo reportage (to such a degree that in book reproductions they actually looked like photos). The compositions are based on the principle of snatching an “occasional” shot from reality and unexpectedly cutting the image. The drawing manner is very careful and accurate. All “roughness” is smoothed by the illumination of a bright day or artificial light. All these techniques masterfully mask the creative process, assimilating the eye of the artist to the passionless lens of the camera, and an artistic product – photos. For genre scenes the artist used portrait etudes named *Chinese types*. These drawings look so illusory that they look as if they are about to leave the paper sheet. In the manner of an artist who wishes to represent nature “objectively”, some elements of naturalism are visible, born under the influence of the philosophy and aesthetics of positivism. This style brought to V. Podgursky the love of his audience. His art works were invariably bought up from exhibitions even in the 1940s (the Second World War period) that were the most difficult years for Russian artist-émigrés.

The drawing style of M. Kitchigin and V. Podgursky is not out of sync with artistic practices of that time. The brightest representatives of this style which is defined as neoclassicism (neoacademism) were V.I. Shukhaev (1887–1973) and A.E. Yakovlev (1887–1938). Artists of the same generation emigrated to Europe after the revolution in Russia.

The landscape was the second popular genre for Russian emigrants in China, represented by plein-air painting enriched with the decorative brightness of the natural and cultural environment of China. The sea, the mountains and the Chinese architecture became favourite motifs within the painting of Russian

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<sup>4)</sup> Podgursky Victor Stepanovich (1893–1969) was the descendant of Polish nobleman who participated in the national-liberation revolt and were banished to Siberia. V. Podgursky was born in the Tomsk province and started to study in Vladivostok. He learned art at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpturing and Architecture (1914–1918). The revolution and the Civil war in Russia prevented him from finishing his education. In 1918 V. Podgursky emigrated to China from Vladivostok. Since 1920 he lived in Shanghai, worked as a painter, a decorator of buildings. In 1947 he returned to the USSR. He taught at Kazan Art School (1948–1958), From 1958 he taught at the Art Department of Tashkent Theatre and Art Institute (Uzbekistan).



artists (M. Kitchigin, *Boys* (1929), *The Summer palace in Beijing* (1930) (Fig. 6), *At the waftage on the Pearl river* (1932); V. Podgursky, *Harvesting* (1946)).

M. Kitchigin as an artist of the Russian realistic school developed the traditions and skills received at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpturing and Architecture. He remained faithful to the lessons of his teacher, a well-known Russian artist named K.A. Korovin, for all his life, especially to his emotional joyful admiration of the world. M. Kitchigin was not interested in the natural-science characteristic of reality. His pictures were characterised by decorative visual effects. He often finished his pictures in his studio from memory or by using sketches, postcards and photos. Nevertheless, the artist used the form of an etude which had been cultivated by Moscow impressionism and 20<sup>th</sup> century art as a way to express vivid impressions.

V. Kuznetsova,<sup>5)</sup> by her own admission, didn't know European art, but she intuitively chose an impressionist style for her watercolours, which one might call decorative impressionism. The artist tried to reproduce the "divine colours of China". The colour of her watercolours is special: bright yellow combined with vivacious, deep blue, violet tones. It seems these colours do not exist in nature. However, the atmosphere of China is full of them. A sensitive eye, the nose, an artist's intuition may catch them. It is a transfusion of the overall impression from Chinese nature and culture. Here the dazzling sun, bright colours life, national clothes, atmosphere of picturesque holidays, red lamps, spicy aromas make the special aura of the East so attractive to the European (Fig. 7).

Vera Kuznetsova was born in China and lived in the Chinese cultural environment since her childhood. It was a natural background for her life. She couldn't understand the depth of Chinese culture but simply got used to it on an everyday level. She often used the motifs, stylistics, and colour of the local culture in her works of art. She especially loved folk art which appealed to her with its general availability, brightness, and decorative effects. She always admired Chinese art and spoke of how much China had given her. National Chinese holidays, theatre, popular prints, ancient paintings and sculpture of

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<sup>5)</sup> Kuznetsova-Kitchigina Vera Emeljanovna (1904–2005), was born in Harbin, Manchuria to a family of Russian colonists. V.E. Kuznetsova studied art at the studio of arts "the Lotus", formed by Russian emigrants (teachers: M.A. Kitchigin, A.A. Bernardatsi, V.M. Anastasiev, A.L. Kamenskiy. V.Kuznetsova was a talented person. She quickly became an independent artist. Michael Kitchigin and Vera Kuznetsova met in 1921 and lived together almost 50 years. From 1948 they lived in Yaroslavl (Russia). Their life was a unique experience of intercultural dialogue, the commonwealth of creative people. Most of V. Keznetsova's works of art are now kept in Yaroslavl Art Museum.



temples and palaces inspired her to create her own artistic works which stood as an illustration and a reinterpretation of the local cultural tradition.

V. Kuznetsova's love for the Chinese popular print was her expression of an artistic trend of that time. A Russian researcher of the Orient culture, V.M. Alekseev (1880–1951), collected and brought to Russia almost four thousand collections of the popular print known as “njanhua”. To a greater degree this art was appreciated by Russian artists such as M.D. Vinogradov, M.F. Larionov, I.I. Mashkov, V.I. Shuhaev, A.E. Jakovlev.<sup>6)</sup> In 1920–1930, the Russian artist-emigrant in China, A.I. Sungurov, was involved in gathering and studying Chinese national pictures.

V. Kuznetsova was actively involved in Chinese popular print in the second half of the 1930s. Her big moment came with the decoration of the book “Diamond jubilee of the international settlement of Shanghai”.<sup>7)</sup> According to the author, the history of China should have been illustrated with old engravings and the works of modern artists adapted for the understanding of the European audience. V. Kuznetsova offered her own stylisation of the Chinese national picture. She made 13 works on paper especially for the book: *The Son of the Sky*, *The scene at the imperial court*, *Audience* (Fig. 8), *Confucius and his pupils*, *Chinese actors*. Explaining her method, the artist always said that these were not copies but that the works were “according to Chinese popular print” and were free interpretations. The style of V. Kuznetsova's works united the elements of Chinese graphic culture and the European modern style of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which in turn was born under the influence of Oriental art. She said: “In general the East is very decorative, interesting. I have seen so much in China that subsequently nature was utterly unnecessary for me to create my own works of art. And when I was asked: “Verochka, will you make scenes in the Oriental style for us?” – I always painted from memory very quickly and precisely”<sup>8)</sup>

In China, artists had to join the art market. They worked in various civil engineering firms, publishing houses, theatres, the advertising companies and they also painted portraits. Their customers were Englishmen, Americans, rich Chinese and Russian people. This clientele was not versed in art but merely followed the cultural norm of the time when it was considered good form to have one's portrait painted by an artist. The realistic manner satisfied the tastes

<sup>6)</sup> Riftin (1991: 7–8, 10–11).

<sup>7)</sup> Kounin (1940).

<sup>8)</sup> Lebedeva (2004: 35–36).



of customers who most of all wanted “the similarity” that was considered one of criteria of artistic skill in their eyes.

The portrait of lady Borhart (1930), the wife of a Shanghai businessman, by M. Kitchigin could be an example of such work. The high-life of Shanghai differed little from European cities, inferior only to Paris or London. On the territory of the International settlement and the French concession operated numerous well-known shops, elite clubs with regular performances, concerts, balls, and parties. Life was pleasant, comfortable and with lower costs than in Europe or in the USA. M. Kitchigin was a master of pastels that excellently suited female salon portraits which required beauty and flattery.

Such portraits were always given to the owners. Some of them have remained thanks to photos. So it happened with the portrait of Y.M. Yankovsky.<sup>9)</sup> Yury Mikhaylovich Yankovsky (1879–1956) was a well-known person in the Far East. A hereditary landowner, industrialist and fearless hunter of tigers, he lost all his property during the period of the revolution and civil war in Russia. After that he emigrated to Korea where he managed to recreate a hunting and trade economy near the city of Sejsin. There Y. Yankovsky built a farm which took the name of “Novina” and a dacha community for relaxation. During summer, residents and tourists from Harbin, Seoul, Tjantszin and Shanghai took a rest at “Yankovsky’s resort”. Among them there were many Russian emigrants. During his first visit to Novina in 1932, M. Kitchigin made a portrait of Y. Yankovsky. In its conception this drawing is simple and clear: a fine-featured face with a strong chin, direct tenacious look, moustaches, wide shoulders, a strong neck and chest. This image created by the artist more exactly reflect the character of the person than his photos.

The artist A.A. Yaron<sup>10)</sup> was an interesting representative of the “young” generation of Russian emigrants in China. We have managed to locate his

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<sup>9)</sup> Scientific archive of Yaroslavl Art Museum; ms 27.

<sup>10)</sup> Jaron [Yaron] Alexander Aleksandrovich (1910, Tallinn, Estonia – 1991, Washington, the USA) was the son of the well-known Shanghai architect A.I. Jaron, who emigrated from Russia. Since 1924 A.A. Jaron lived in Shanghai. He studied art at the studios of Russian artists-emigrants (V.S. Podgursky). He worked as the artist in an advertising firm “Carl Crow and Inc.”, in art studio “Millington Ltd.”. Until 1930 he held the post of artistic director of the publishing and printing house “Post Mercury Co.”. Since 1935 he worked with the publisher I.I. Kunin. In 1938 they set up a book-publishing firm “Adcraft studios”, in which A.A. Jaron worked as an artist and the art editor. In the early forties A.A. Jaron founded “Studio of Jaron” which became an art studio and large advertising agency in China. (The studio continued to exist later in Washington.) In 1949 he emigrated with his family to the island Tubabao in the Philippines. After some traveling, he arrived in the USA, worked in San Francisco, Washington. Encyclopedias of the USA characterize



heritage which is kept in the USA. Alex Yaron was a versatile and enterprising artist. He worked as a painter, designer, illustrator, theatre artist and icon painter. He painted portraits, landscapes and naked models. The portraits by A. Yaron, especially those of well-known personalities, are schematic and a little “dry”, maybe because the artist often insisted on creating them from a photo (the portrait of the famous politician of China Sun Jatsen (1936)). A. Yaron devoted a lot of time to the commercial sphere. An example of such was the advertisement of the Shanghai coal company *Dongtrieu Anthracite Coal* (the end of 1930s) (Fig. 9). This advertising methodology of using images of differing scale in combination with a realistic style resembles *The Bolshevik* by the Russian artist B.M. Kustodiev (1920) and the popular film *King-Kong* (1933). The huge figure of a worker over the panorama of Shanghai creates a horrific image of urban industrialisation. Actually all works by Alex Yaron were made professionally. His focus on the commercial market determined the style of his artistic output. The artist was educated in Shanghai in the context of fierce competition and struggle for survival.

The story of Russian art in China would be not complete without mentioning the so-called Russian theme which remained very important for Russian artist-émigrés as a means of self-identification.

M. Kitchigin could not live or create without Russian images. At exhibitions in Harbin and Shanghai, he always displayed his favourite scenes from Russian village life: *Haymaking*, *Gathering of apples*, *A village holiday*, *A peasant wedding*, all hand in hand with Chinese etudes. In the 1930s in Shanghai, the artist painted *The Portrait of parents* (Fig. 10) representing his father, mother and godmother. Living for many years far away from his native land, without any communication with his relatives, M. Kichigin did not even know if they were still alive. Feelings were strong, therefore the portrait turned out to be bright and expressive. It is not necessary to search exact physiognomical similarity in it – artistic work became an expression of a sincere nostalgic experience. The composition of the portrait looks unusual: three heads on the horizontally extended canvas. Artists used this when they wanted to emphasise a relationship, people’s communication, a special connection between the represented people. [V.I. Shuhaev, *Three heads* (V.I. Shuhaev, V.F. Shuhaeva, A.E. Yakovlev). (1922); K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, *A self-portrait with his wife and daughter* (1933)]. Actually the artist used the traditional composition of a Russian icon: the Christ

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him as a designer and advertising artist. Now Elena Yaron, widow of A.A. Yaron, lives in the USA. She is the proprietress of the archive and the art heritage of the Jarons.



and the Madonna and John the Baptist. For M. Kitchigin, images of his parents merged with the concept of his native land and they became an icon as did the whole of Russia to which he prayed and which he remembered in his thoughts and words.

In 1941 in the Shanghai magazine "Rubezh" ("Boundary") appeared an article with the expressive name "With a palette in the international hell of Shanghai" in which the journalist N. Rostova published an interview with the artist: "Well-known master of the brush Kitchigin once answered a question about the lives of Russian artists in Shanghai: "We live as it is possible to live having been torn away from our native land that is as necessary for an artist as paints and inspiration..."<sup>11)</sup>

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<sup>11)</sup> Rostova (1941: 5).



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Fig. 1. Michael Kitchigin, *Sing-song girls. Harbin, 1920s*



Fig. 2. Michael Kitchigin, *Family dinner, 1930*





Fig. 3. Vera Kuznetsova, *The old man with a pipe*, 1937





Fig. 4. Victor Podgursky, *To the market*, 1947





Fig. 5. Victor Podgursky, *Street restaurant*, 1930s





Fig. 6. Michael Kitchigin, *The Summer palace in Beijing*, 1930





Fig. 7. Vera Kuznetsova, *Canton. On the canals*, 1932



Fig. 8. Vera Kuznetsova, *Audience*, 1934





Fig. 9. Alexander Yaron, *The advertisement of Shanghai coal company «Dongtrieu Anthracite Coal»*, the end of 1930s

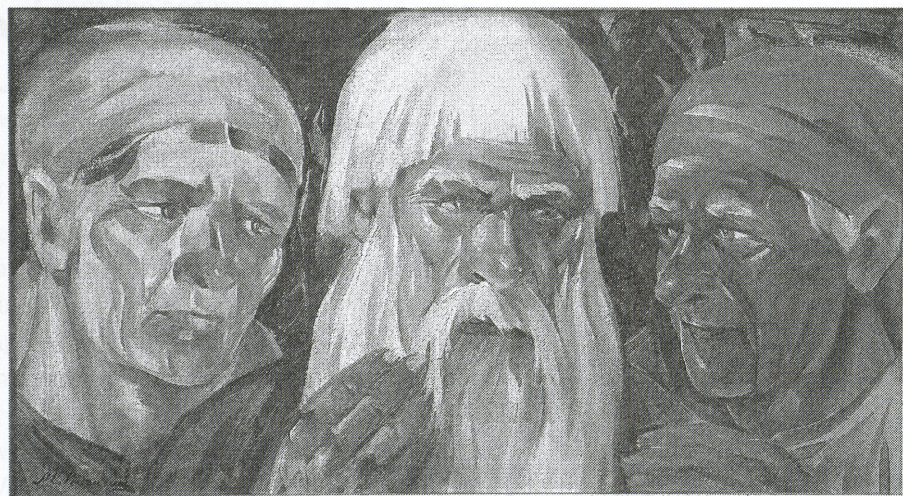


Fig. 10. Michael Kitchigin, *The Portrait of parents*, 1930s