

THE MICRO AND MACRO OF RUSSIAN LANDSCAPE ART

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Nineteenth-century landscape painters concerned with realism such as Ivan Shishkin and Isaac Levitan were among the first to create an artistic depiction of a purely Russian landscape that was distinct from European conventions of aesthetics and scenery. One way that these artists created a national landscape was through rich geo-biographic and botanical detail; oftentimes these paintings displayed identifiable species native to the Russian terrain. The exhibit “Life on the Edge of the Forest” at the Russian Museum of Art in Minneapolis displays traditional woodworking and landscape paintings related to the forest. There are also thirty watercolor mycological illustrations by Alexander Viazmensky on display at the Museum (Sept. 13, 2014–March 22, 2015). His illustrations display multiple mushrooms surrounded by particles from a shared natural environment, creating a sort of deconstructed landscape painting. Though Viazmensky is known for his “mushroom portraits,” he also has extensive experience with landscape painting. However, he sees very little cross-over between the two genres, despite the shared subject of natural elements. The mushroom, in fact, is a popular image in Russian culture that features in many genres, including landscape paintings such as those created by Shishkin. Close examination of several works by the artists Ivan Shishkin and Alexander Viazmensky reveals shared concerns between landscape art and botanical illustration in terms of biological detail, setting, structure, and culture.

The flat and rural expanse of Russia’s terrain and the micro landscapes that lie within that flatland were not artistically explored until cultural debates about the representation of national identity arose during the eighteenth century. Russian artists were typically trained in European landscape techniques and accepted European standards of “scenery” which was a more sublime and heightened landscape than Russian flatlands. In his 2002 book, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, Christopher Ely suggests that “by the standards of generally accepted European aesthetic conventions, the central heartland of Russia, with its thick forests, level plains, and harsh climate, represented some of the least pleasant and least picturesque natural space in Europe” (7). Therefore, Russian artists commonly went to Europe or exotic locations for artistic endeavors, and paintings of Russian landscape often included imagined fragments. Though the concern for a national identity was developing during the eighteenth century, “before the 1820s, representations of the native landscape rarely surpassed a rudimentary and imitative level in Russian poetry and painting” (Ely 5). Russian artists of the mid to late nineteenth century were the first to thrive in painting the Russian landscape through realism. For the first time, artists such as Isaac Levitan and

Apollinariii Mikhailovich Vasnetsov were depicting the flat and open land that covered so much of the Russian expanse. In the 1892 painting *The Vladimirka Road* (fig. 1), Levitan captures a realistic depiction of the vast and dreary Russian space; Vasnetsov portrays a hopeful scene of central Russia in his 1886 painting *Motherland*. The acceptance of Russia's flat land on the canvas included unmistakably Russian detail such as people, clothing, objects, buildings, and homes, but more specifically topographical and geographic details. In his article "The Natural History of National Identity in Russian Landscape Painting," James West writes that "there was a particular determined effort on the part of some Russian painters to present a national landscape based primarily on geography, flora and fauna." Ivan Shishkin's artistic career was devoted primarily to exploring Russian forests in careful detail, a good example of this is his very famous 1891 painting *Morning in a Pine Forest*. The Russian flora and fauna belonging to the landscape that had also been artistically ignored finally began to be featured. The cultural importance of the native macro-landscape during the late nineteenth century brought closer attention to the micro landscapes of the biota within the Russian expanse.

The relationship between botanical illustration and landscape painting, particularly late nineteenth century landscapes, is based on the biological accuracy of natural elements. Commenting on the wide genre of botanical art and illustration in the article "Better than a Thousand Words," Elia T. Ben-Ari notes that "all these works share an emphasis on careful observation and accurate rendering of botanical subjects so that the image is clearly 'readable' by the viewer." A high level of observation was necessary for Russian nineteenth century landscape painters as they were concerned about the "readability" and accuracy of an unmistakably Russian landscape, which led to realistic renderings of Russian native species. For example, *Aegopoium, Pargolovo* (1884) is a famous depiction of *Aegopoium Podgaria* (goutweed), which is "familiar in Russia as a persistent weed that is difficult to eradicate" (West). The painting is eye level, "which is one of the most common traditions of botanical art" (Ben-Ari). The portrayal of this nuisance weed is also representative of the acceptance of the Russian terrain on a small scale. Ukrainian and Russian landscape painter Arkhip Kuindzhi's 1881 painting *Morning on the Dnieper* (fig. 2) depicts a patch of wildflowers elevated above a river which drifts in the horizon. The painting has intentional paint spots that depict the visitation of the butterflies identified as the Small Tortoiseshell butterfly and Green-veined white butterfly (West). West writes that "the butterflies in Kuindzhi's *Morning of the Dniepr* reflects the common practice of depicting insects on plants in botanical illustrations." Certainly the inclusion of insects or plant pollinators in a landscape painting takes biological detail to a whole new level of realism, breaking the barrier between botanical and landscape art. The mycological illustrations that Viazmensky has on exhibit portray no insects, but all of his images are concerned with accuracy of the subject and natural character. His illustrations represent the fungi in entirety, frequently displaying the freshly unearthed roots. The inclusion of the roots provides the viewer a complete profile of the plant, and Viazmensky often provides multiple angles of the species in one illustration. Just as landscape painters like Shishkin and Kuindzhi are realistically capturing plants to portray

the wholeness of the Russian space, Viazmensky's botanical illustrations are concerned with the biological wholeness of the mushroom.

Both genres are interested with the information of the setting and surroundings of a plant. Landscape paintings communicate information about the entire habitat or ecosystem of a particular plant. Shishkin's scenes portray detailed biota in their natural territory. Rather than detail only in the foreground, he frequently commits to full detail throughout the entire composition, like *Flowers at the Edge of a Wood* (1893). Shishkin painted the micro landscapes at eye level with identifiable detail as he does in *Stones in a Forest* (1858). This painting depicts the natural growth of a variety of species: ferns, grass, moss, and shrubs. The habitat of these plants is clearly nestled within the stony forest floor. The stony nook appears to be dense and receives less sunlight than the grassy patch in the background. While landscape painting like this one has a larger and more elaborate attention to setting, the work of an illustrator is to deconstruct the landscape to create a detailed ecological zone atop of the white background. Botanical illustration will often focus on one species but include other natural elements from shared habitat. This is a technique that Viazmensky has developed in nearly all of his illustrations. As we see in his other paintings, *Boletus Edulis* (fig. 3) displays the fungi surrounded by leaves, twigs, shreds of grass, and specs of dirt plucked from the habitat naturally shared with *Boletus Edulis*. This provides a holistic impression of the natural habitat of the fungi at hand. As in a landscape painting, Viazmensky uses the colors of the leaves included to provide insight to the mushroom's season of growth.

Capturing a sense of natural environment in a composition is something that both genres achieve through manipulation of arrangement, unlike a still life which is obviously organized in an unnatural setting—like a table or box. While Shishkin's elaborate forest scenes often depict the wildness of an untouched forest, Viazmensky's botanical illustrations appear to be dramatically strewn, capturing a sense of motion. Both artists thus share the illusion of realism in their work; however, there is a certain amount of organized structure and arrangement in each artist's work. Shishkin's intentions were to capture landscapes realistically and portray the wild disorder of nature, as he does in *Windfall* (1888). Leaning or fallen trees, broken branches, and forest debris definitely give the impression of wildness. Yet, it is important to note that Shishkin often consulted photographs to see a scene as a simplified composition and pull out important shapes and contours within the scene (West). It is also true that Shishkin would often simplify a scene before he started by "carefully arranging the forest to his liking, clearing away undergrowth and breaking off intrusive branches" (West). Manipulated arrangement is more expected in botanical illustration since the plant is already separated from its environment on a blank page. A botanical illustrator often has artistic liberty in the organization of the subject on a page. More so that Shishkin's serious compositions of the forest, Viazmensky's illustrations have a playful and natural arrangement that reflect his own jubilant approach to his work. Much of Viazmensky's work is done from nature, and he finds much enjoyment in the search for mushrooms as he expressed in his talk at TMORA. His work reflects the enjoyment that he

receives from the search, as his watercolors look as if he scooped up the mushrooms and spontaneously tossed them onto the page.

Mushrooms, perhaps even more than the other species featured in macro and micro Russian landscapes, seem to carry special cultural significance. Fungi is a beautiful subject for mycological and landscape art. It seems that, more specifically, *amanita muscara* is well represented in painting and illustration, most likely because of its red coloring and fairytale-like spots. Both Shishkin and Viazmensky have realistic (yet different) renderings of the *amanita muscara* during different stages of development. In Shishkin's 1879 painting *Fly Agaric* (fig. 4) and in Viazmensky's *Amanita Muscaria* (fig. 5), there is exploration of the same species in different forms and shapes—depicting both flat and rounded caps. The species has caught the attention of other artists as well. Yelena Polenova, a contemporary of Shishkin, produced an illustration for the fairy tale “War Mushroom,” in which *amanita muscara* pop among a mythical yet realistic micro landscape. Famous twentieth-century illustrator Ivan Yakovlevich Bilibin often depicted folkloric scenes. Though his illustrations often reflect the theatrics of the stories, he is very precise in his depictions of nature. Bilibin is often considered a part of the art nouveau movement, which generally depicts flora and fauna as nondescript and decorative. However, Bilibin was concerned with national motifs, and in *Mushrooms* (1900) he also depicted the *amanita muscaria* as mythical by painting it outlandishly larger than the other mushrooms. Though Viazmensky paints mushrooms in the tradition of scientific illustration, he is certainly aware of the folkloric tradition of his subjects. In his profile on Botanicalartists.com, Viazmensky writes “I call my watercolors ‘portraits of mushrooms.’ For these portraits, I select not the most typical but the most pleasant and happy looking individuals.” He writes about the importance of portraying their character, a character that is not only scientific but an image of cultural significance. Plant species as they have developed in botanical illustration and landscape paintings have become characters of the Russian landscape.

The portrayal of a botanically accurate Russian landscape that would represent national identity, then, has evolved to convey features of cultural import. This was the effort of both visual and written art. The landscape that was once considered unsightly is now the vast terrain containing an abundance of cultural treasures, such as the Russian biota. As Rachel May writes in her article “Narrating Landscape, Landscaping Narrative,” “the connection between literature and the Russian landscape is, in a sense, a natural one, a horizontal symbiosis of land and text under which lie submerged rich narratives of culture and nation” (84). The sense of narration exists within the miniature landscapes as well, for the imagery of a mushroom, even if scientific has folkloric characteristics. Due to careful artistic attention to natural Russian landscapes, even small plant habitats have their place in the narrated Russian history. The two genres work together in this narration. While landscape paintings draw the reader into a story or history, the individual elements of the micro landscape act as characters of a much larger plot.



Fig. 1. Isaak Levitan, *The Vladimirka Road* (1892)



Fig. 2. Arkhip Ivanovich Kuindzhi, *The Dnieper in the Morning* (1881)



Fig. 3. Alexander Viazmensky, *Boletus Edulis*



Fig. 4. Ivan Shishkin, *Fly Agaric* (1879)



Fig. 5. Alexander Viazmensky, *Amanita Muscaria*

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