PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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NICHOLAS OF RUSSIA TRAVELS TO THE EAST. I: CHINESE WATERCOLOURS ON PITH

In 1890, Nicholas, future Nicholas II of Russia, sets off on a Grand Tour. Before him the Orient, a land of miracles and mystery. Visiting Greece, Egypt, India, Ceylon, Singapore, Java, Siam, China and Japan, travelling back through Siberia. Nicholas brought from each land rich gifts, commemorative items and works of art.

Most of what he brought back, including both official gifts and personal acquisitions, is now in the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Russian Academy of Sciences. Taken together, this fascinating collection presents a picture of the last Russian Emperor totally different from and yet complementary to the romantic view created by a series of books and films over the course of the 20th century. It reveals his personal outlook, his tastes and preferences, his strengths and his numerous weaknesses.

Nicholas’s Tour

For the first time since 1837 the heir to the throne of Russia — the world’s largest country — set off on an extensive international tour. His status was such that much intense diplomatic effort was put into drawing up the itinerary. Like Peter the Great, Nicholas’s “Grand Embassy” of 1897–8, when the monarch travelled across Northern Europe meeting kings and gaining hands-on experience of many skills vital to the country, the aim of the tour was to strengthen contacts between Russia and foreign lands: except that now the object of attention was the mysterious Orient.

Yet it all grew out of a purely Russian enterprise, a desire to familiarise Nicholas with the Far Eastern parts of his future territories. In 1890 he father, Alexander III, approved construction of the Great Siberian Railway and ordered Nicholas to represent him in Vladivostok at the ceremonial launch of works and symbolically push the first wheelbarrow.

The Crown Prince set off on 23 October 1890 and returned nearly ten months later on 4 August 1891. By then he had travelled 54,500 km, 16,000 of them by railway, 5,300 by carriage, 9,700 by river and 23,400 by sea.

Travelling from Russia to Trieste, Nicholas moved on to Greece and through the Mediterranean to Port-Said in Egypt. While the ships sailed along the Suez Canal, Nicholas and his companions — by now including Prince George of Greece — travelled along the Nile and back to view Egypt’s great monuments. From the Suez Canal the Russian ships moved on to Bombay via Aden.

In India, Nicholas and Prince George set off overland: Bombay — Agra — Lahore — Amritsar — Benares — Calcutta — Bombay — Madras and then by sea to Colombo (Ceylon). They admired the temple cut into a rock on Elephant Island, the Golden Temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar, and they met local rulers and hunted. In addition to their numerous purchases, they also received an abundance of presents — marvellously ornamented fabrics, silk shawls, weapons, miniatures with Indian landscapes and portraits of historical figures [1].

From Ceylon, the Russian ships with Nicholas and his suite on board sailed to Bangkok via Singapore and Batavia (Java). For a week Nicholas was the guest of King Rama V Chulalongkorn of Siam, a reformer whose role in Siam’s history is often compared to that of Peter I in Russia. Nicholas and Rama V became firm friends: the Russian prince was awarded the highest Siamese order and given personal presents by the king. In 1897, Chulalongkorn was to visit St. Petersburg where one of his sons attended the elite school for boys, the Corps de Pages, and married a Russian girl. Russia also served as an intermediary in relations between Siam and France and it was thanks to Nicholas’s intervention that Siam preserved its independence. From that time on the parade uniforms of officers in the Thai army were modelled on Russian uniforms of the early 20th century.

Thence Nicholas moved on to Nanjing via Singapore, Batavia (Java), Saigon and Hong Kong, sailing the Yangtze River on a ship of the Russian voluntary fleet, Vladivostok, to the town of Hangzhou. This was the site of a large tea-house belonging to Russia’s biggest supplier of Chinese tea. Amongst the gifts Nicholas received there were different devices for tea-making and samples of all sorts of tea. This collection survives today, being preserved by keepers at the Kunstkamera throughout the terrible 900-day Siege of
Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was then called) in the Second World War, during which some 900,000 people died of starvation.

The visit to Japan began in Nagasaki. Travelling incognito, Nicholas explored the town, making regular visits with officers of the squadron to Inasumura or Inusa, a suburb with many geisha establishments which was often called the "Russian" village since it was popular with Russian sailors. There Nicholas met a geisha called O-Matsu, of whom a strange portrait survives: a life-size doll (fig. 1) presented to Nicholas by celebrated craftsman Kavasima Drimbeli. It is thought that this present among the other ones was in fact made on the initiative of the Japanese Emperor after the "incident in Otso".

This event overshadowed Nicholas' pleasant stay in Japan. With Prince George and Prince Arisugava-no-miya, Nicholas travelled by rice shaw from Kyoto to Otso, visiting a market where, according to Nicholas, they bought souvenirs, many of which can be identified with items in the Kunstkamera. As the long procession moved slowly along a crowded street on the way back to Kyoto, one of the policemen responsible for public order pulled out a samurai sword and struck Nicholas twice on the head. Prince George seems to have saved Nicholas' life by beating off the next blow with his walking stick.

Although the wounds were not dangerous, the incident changed Nicholas' plans: instead of moving on to America, Nicholas made his way back to Russia. Arriving in Vladivostok, he launched the Great Siberian Railway before embarking on an epic journey across his native land. Nicholas visited the most important Siberian cities, met local delegations and received many outlandish gifts. In the city of Tomsk he visited the grave of the old monk Fedor, an enigmatic figure believed by many to have been Russian Tsar Alexander I, whose death in 1825 was thought by some to be a cover for the religious monarch's withdrawal from society.

Recording the Journey

Such was the significance of Nicholas' journey, even at the time that it was recorded almost immediately for posterity.

Count Utkhonskiy (1861—1921) — scientist, diplomat, publicist, traveller and collector — spent six years compiling three large volumes dedicated to the tour: The Journey to the East of His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince, 1895—1896, published 1895—1896. Immediately the book was translated into English, German and French.

Numerous illustrations by Nikolai Karazin (1842—1900), added to the book's success. Karazin, known as "the Russian Dore", was not only an artist, but also a writer, ethnographer and traveller. The book contains over 700 of his illustrations.

Nicholas Grisenko (1856—1900), official artist of the Naval Ministry, accompanied the travellers and produced an official record in a vast number of watercolours (about 300) of which are now in the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, capturing the exotic nature of the countries visited.

The crew of the Prince's frigate included V. Mendeleev (1865—1898), son of the famous chemist and an amateur photographer, who created a photographic chronicle of the journey. Over 200 of his photographs survive today in St. Petersburg collections, presenting a totally unfamiliar view of the tour and its royal participants (figs. 2—6).

In the winter of 1893—1894 a special exhibition was held for charitable purposes in the Winter Palace, the official royal residence. The accompanying catalogue, compiled by the Administration of His Imperial Majesty, describes some 1313 objects. In 1897, after which Nicholas was married and had been Emperor for three years, the ethnographical part of this collection was given to the Kunstkamera Museum, the rest remaining in the imperial palaces and being redistributed after the revolution between the Hermitage, the Russian Museum and the palace-museums outside St. Petersburg and Moscow (although some items seem to have been sold by the government in the 1920s and 1930s). One item recently turned up in the State Historical Museum in far-off Tobolsk, having been taken in 1918 by Nicholas to his Siberian exile, which came to an abrupt end with the execution of the royal family.

Exhibition and Documentary Film Concept

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Russian Academy of Sciences together with the Hermitage Bridge Studio are now preparing an exhibition entitled Face to Face: Nicholas of Russia Travels to the East to be shown in the US, European capitals and those states visited by Nicholas, complementing the many major exhibitions of the last decade devoted to Nicholas and Alexandra.

The exhibition will present more than 300 items from Egypt, India, Thailand, China, Japan and Siberia, mainly from the Kunstkamera, but also from the State Hermitage and Peterhof Museums, around 100 original photographs (Russian National Library and Kunstkamera) showing naval routine, scenes from Nicholas' travels and the foundation of the Siberian railway, models of ships and different naval accessories from the Central Navy Museum and richly bound editions of Count Utkhonskiy's books in Russian, English, French and German from the Russian National Library.

The exhibition organizers are planning that the Russian sailing ship Mir [Peace / World] will follow the route taken by Nicholas. The movie shooting during the expedition will present several fascinating episodes connected with the tour of young Nicholas.

A richly illustrated exhibition catalogue presenting the full history of the tour, including the rare full catalogue of an exhibition of Nicholas' souvenirs held on his return, in 1895, is in preparation. We are planning to publish in *Manuscripta Orientalia* the results of the research connected with the collections and separate items that Nicholas brought from his tour.

Fig. 1
Albums with Chinese Watercolours on Pith

In the 18th and 19th centuries, colonial expansion and growing European interest in exotic cultures caused the appearance of special types of art works in India, Africa, China... The objects created were produced especially for export. One notes in this regard “Company painting” (samples of this style were brought by Nicholas from India) and Chinese watercolours on pith [2].

The latter seem to have appeared at the end of the first quarter of the 19th century and immediately became very popular among European travellers. According to Ian Williams [3], who has spent many years researching this kind of painting as yet no duplicate examples of painting on pith before 1826 have come to light. It is said that in that year Kaiser Franz of Austria bought some albums with Chinese watercolours on pith from an English Consul-General Watts in 1826.

“We know of an Italian Count who visited Canton in 1828 and had over 350 paintings on pith in his baggage when he died in Ambon two years later. In the British Library there is a scrap-book containing six pith paintings and a journal entry by a serving British officer who sent them home from India in 1829. These early examples and contemporary accounts by visitors to Canton suggest that there was a flourishing trade in pith paintings by the early 1830s” [4].

Pith paper, still sometimes erroneously called “rice paper” or “mulberry pith”, was cut by hand from the central tissue of the trunk of Papyriferia Tetrapanax, a comparatively small tree native to south-west China and Taiwan. The very nature of the material and the method of cutting the sheets determine their limited size (usualy about 30 x 20 cm). Cutting the thin sheets with a knife from short lengths of the spongy tissue required a great deal of skill. The sheets were ready for use after drying and simple trimming, requiring no other treatment or preparation.

Ian Williams writes:

“Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of these pictures is the sparkling and iridescent effect that the Canton painters could achieve using gouache on the purely natural surface of the pith. The cellular nature of the material is such that whilst the paint sits on the surface without being absorbed or spreading, the light is thrown off at slightly different angles, similar to the effect of a mosaic. Because the paint does not soak into the ground, the painters could achieve very fine detail on what is a miniature scale” [4].

For centuries the material has had a variety of other uses (toys for children, artificial coloured flowers to decorate hair, to make infusions for Chinese medicine, etc).

When Nicholas visited the city of Hangzhou in China, twelve albums of Chinese watercolours on pith were offered to him. The watercolours, bound in albums with red silk brocade covers, can now be found in the Kunstkamera Museum under the shelf mark 311-1/12 (1-12) [6]. The albums were presented by “Molchanov, Pechatnov & Co.”, which had a brick-tea factory in Hangzhou. This is indicated by the company seal found in each album.

It was the Russian consul, P. A. Dmitrievskii who, in his report of May 7 (19) 1891, sent to count D. A. Kapnist, head of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs’ Asiatic Department, a detailed description of Nicholas’ meetings in Hangzhou:

“After the presentation of deputations, His Imperial Highness deigned to accept an invitation to breakfast from a local church elder, a representative of the trading firm Molchanov, Pechatnov & Co., first-pupil merchant Nikita Murtvizhich Molchanov of Kyakhta. The house of Molchanov, Pechatnov & Co. is located virtually at the middle of the embankment in the English concession, near the triumphal arch. It was soothingly constructed in Russian style... Throughout the breakfast, His Imperial Highness kindly deigned to converse about the tea trade in Hangzhou and the share of Russian firms in this trade” [7].

The albums (37 x 25 cm), which contain ten pictures each, present a variety of themes [8]. Among the album subjects one can find images of noblemen [311-1/12 (11) and women [311-1/12 (2), daily activities [311-1/12 (3, 7, 8, 10)], Daoist ceremonies and various processions [311-1/12 (4, 11)], botanical drawings, birds (plate 2), flowers and insects [311-1/12 (5)], traditional entertainments (theatre) [311-1/12 (6)], people making music with the help of various traditional musical instruments [311-1/12 (9)] and, finally, ships on the sea and boats on the river [311-1/12 (12)] (plate 3).

The watercolours were produced with great skill; their quality is above average. Unfortunately, the albums have no studio plates identifying the artist. The pictures can be tentatively dated to the second half of the 19th century.

For a variety of reasons, Chinese watercolours on pith have been undervalued. Little has been written about them. The very existence of the genre is largely unknown both in Europe and China. Taken together, albums containing watercolours of the type described here present a vivid, if occasionally inaccurate, encyclopaedia of 19th-century life in China. The consumer was interested in obvious exoticism, and the artist accommodated the tastes of buyers.

It is our hope that the study of the Nicholas collection and its presentation at the forthcoming exhibition will draw the attention of specialists to this nearly forgotten tradition.

Notes

1. The collection is preserved now in the State Hermitage. We hope to publish its description in our journal.


3. The current presentation became possible only because of the kind support of Ian Williams who sent us some of his works devoted to the subject.
PRESENTING THE MANUSCRIPT

A. Erkinov

PRAYER AGAINST FEVER, CONNECTED WITH THE NAME OF KH"AJA AHMAD YASAWI

A lot is connected with the name and personality of a mystic Ahmad Yasawi (d. 880/1476) from Central Asia: he founded tariqat Yasawiyya, an extensive literature exists on Ahmad Yasawi and on the tariqat founded by him [1]. To him a collection of mystical poems — fikhat (intimacies) in Juhangi'i language called Divan-i fikhat is ascribed [2]. Ahmad Yasawi is mentioned in some sources of mystical character as an author of such texts. In this respect of special interest is a small text du'a — a prayer connected with the name of Ahmad Yasawi. In it his spirit is mentioned as a means which helps to remove fever (bihizgak).

In the list of works in Persian Mardari al-'irfan [3], by a Juhangi'i poet Shih Allahyar (1644—1724) [4] we have found an enclosure on a separate sheet — a du'a text (fig. 1) addressed to a certain person — Allah qill bikh. Reasoning from its contents, the text can conditionally be called Du'a-yi Khadraw Kh"aja Ahmad Yasawi (Khadraw Kh"aja Ahmad Yasawi's Prayer).

Muslim Turks from Central Asia consider Ahmad Yasawi [5] the second in the spiritual hierarchy after Prophet Muhammad [6]. In different sources Ahmad Yasawi was usually mentioned as a s\'ifi gha\'i\'i [7], and folk beliefs turned him into a "spirit" resisting disease [8]. This was a widely used practice. Bayg\i, a folk healer, in his ritual dances in the process of healing of an ill person usually turned to help of saints [9]. He could be engaged in healing of an ill person with the help of a special dance or other methods. Accordingly, texts respecting certain diseases appeared.

Du'a-prayers played an important role in the spiritual life of Central Asia. There were special du'a to cure from any disease. There were particular prayers for creating favourable conditions for advancement of a certain business; for solution of various personal problems; for development of trade [10]; against rivals [11]; they can be found in epigraphical monuments [12] etc. Special books were written where texts of prayers and fortune-telling were collected [13].

Belief and the need for mystical texts also existed after colonisation of Central Asia by Russia (from 1867). These texts were also popular among Russian population of Turkistan. For example, in the beginning of the 20th century

"in Tag\kent they told fortune by handwritten books. In the Russian part of Tag\kent there was a sort female fortune-teller to whose house often came Russian intelligent ladies who were quite satisfied with the old woman’s fortune-telling by the book" [14]. At the same time the tariqats were widely spread — talismans against the evil eye inside which prayer-du'a was put. N. Lykoshin wrote that he had seen a "fortune-teller giving his clients talismans written on scraps of paper" [15]. Tumi\' (simul) — talismans as a means of resistance of different kinds of ailments, and the evil eye still play an important role in the region. The concerned text of du'a-prayer against fever is written on a rectangular sheet of paper, sizes 14.5 x 13. The size of the text is 11 x 8.5. Nasta\'liq script, black ink. We have no exact date of this prayer’s creation; the language can approximately be dated to the 18th—19th centuries. According to its poetic style, the text, to some extent, reminded of the fikhat from Divan-i fikhat ascribed to A. Yasawi [16]. Partly the text is written in rhyming prose (saf). The choice of rhyme was often in detriment of sense. That is why in several cases a translation is very difficult to make, it can only be approximate. By composition the text of the prayer consists of two parts: an introductory part — the destination of the prayer [17]; and the text of the prayer itself (du'a) [18]. The introductory part is written in Persian with elements of the Tajik language which is typical of Persian texts of Central Asia beginning from, approximately, 18th century. The text of the prayer itself is in Juhangi’i. This must have been done to emphasise the sacred character of the text. Apart from the hamsad in the beginning of the prayer, after the introductory part, there is nothing in the text which accentuates its Islamic character. The most important part of the text is driving out the disease with the help of A. Yasawi’s spirit. In Central Asia there was a rite kula\'irun ("exorcism", "removal", "driving out") [19]. In shamanism the rite in which the shaman healed an ill person was considered a rite of a spirit’s removal — kula\'irun [20]. In our case the text of the prayer in its essence is close to the abovementioned rite of driving out of spirits.

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