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Final Thesis

**The Art of
Relation**

The practice of depicting
landscape and the
ecological
consciousness.
Ukrainian artists of the
19th - early 20th century

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Introduction

The thesis aim is to study the art practices, in particular, landscape painting, and its place within a historical ecological framework. The topic of the thesis belongs to the discipline of ecocritical art history, a relatively new branch of Environmental Humanities. When traditional art history treats artworks as isolated aesthetic objects, ecocritical art history aims to address ecological influence in visual arts, recognizing how environment and art can shape each other. Ecocritical art history as a discipline urges scholars not to limit themselves to artworks with direct ecological content, but to read ecological influence in visual culture through history.

The example of Theodore Rousseau - a French landscapist whose legacy goes beyond a physical collection of his artworks, as during his life he successfully advocated for the establishment of the first Western world's governmental land preservation site in the mid-19th century. (Thomas, 2000) However, it would be limiting to narrow entanglements of art and environment to cases of preservation, or any cases with 'positive' or sustainable environmental outcomes. As ecology - the study of relationships between living organisms and their environments (Haeckel, 1969) - recently left narrow scientific circles and now is a topic of a broad discussion, it is often mistaken for sustainability, meaning when something is claimed as ecological in only the sense of being sustainable for the environment, capable of meeting the need of present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Ecology, as a discipline, and consequently ecocritical art history, is broader and includes cases of relationships that have a negative impact or no impact on the environment. With that remark, the cases for the thesis were chosen - Ukrainian artists of the 19th - early 20th century: Ivan Aivazovsky, Taras Shevchenko, Maximilian Voloshin, all of whom have a documented history not only of art

practices that include depiction of landscapes, but also social and environmental impact on various scales. Although all the artists mentioned held the practice that led to state-established land preservation sites, that is not their only ecological legacy.

A closer look at the chosen cases allows one to observe how artworks as objects and the practice of creating them are embedded in environmental politics and environmental sensibility, how they not only testify about human/non-human relationships specific to the time period but at moments shape those relationships. Each separate case elaborates on the relationship with a different non-human entity: marines of Aivazovsky and bodies of water, arboreal imagery of Taras Shevchenko and trees, earthy landscapes of Maximilian Voloshin and rocks.

Research into historical documents surrounding the practice of creating landscape paintings could reveal that certain concepts and approaches developed and researched after the *Silent Spring* era of the 1960s have roots that extend deeper into history, where art was not yet a direct form of environmental activism. Historical studies are intended to enrich contemporary ecocritical discourse and rethink the entanglement of ecosystem agents. The necessary methodology was further studied in the State of the Art section. Generally, it could be outlined as casting canonical works and figures in a new light by revealing their previously unnoticed complexity, ambivalence, or even antipathy regarding environmental concerns. It could be achieved by examining authors' biographies and their statements about relating to non-human entities, considering a depicted landscape as a mode of ecological attention, and closely analyzing the content, materials, and political context. The diversity of case studies allows for a comparative analysis across media, geography, and historical moments.

State of the Art

The thesis aims to explore the connection between the practice of landscape painting and the awakening of ecological consciousness. Given the historical context of the research, it is crucial to examine not only the current state of ecocritical art history but also the significant moments of development in ecological thought at the time.

Early History of Ecological Thought (18th-early 20th century)

Ecological topics and thoughts can be traced through history, such as references in the philosophy of ancient Greece; in the 18th and 19th centuries, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) worked on the "economy of nature," and Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) produced studies in botanical geography that laid the groundwork for later ecological thought. In the early 18th century, preceding Carl Linnaeus, early ecological studies were divided in two schools of thought: Arcadian, that was promoting "simple, humble life for man" and a harmonious relationship with humans and nature attributed with Gilbert White (1720-1793); and Imperial, with ideology of Francis Bacon (1562-1626) of establishing man's dominance over 'nature'. Carl Linnaeus supported the Imperial school of thought, and it became the dominant view within the discipline. (Worster, 1994)

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) made significant contributions to the understanding of ecological interactions, defining principles of evolution.

The definition of *ecology* originated from the works of Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in 1869, derived from Greek *oikos*, meaning 'household', and *logos*, meaning 'study'. Thus, the study of the environmental house includes all the

organisms in it and all the functional processes that make the “household” habitable.
(Odum & Barrett, 1971, pp 2-4)

Arthur G. Tansley (1871-1955) coined the term “ecosystem” in the journal *Ecology* in 1945.

Ecocritical Art History

Notion on ‘nature’:

‘Nature’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, generally refers to “phenomena of the physical world collectively; esp. plants, animals, and other features of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations.” (Stevens, 2005) Stated opposition is also defined by the nature-culture dualism, with ‘culture’ being the product of human society; this dualism is challenged by modern anthropologists and environmental philosophers (Cronon, 1997; Morton, 2009; Eriksen, 2016) and deemed a potential danger to sustainable coexistence. In critical art history, Braddock closely examines the topic of the nature-culture divide in the chapter "Nature: Wilderness Trouble" from *Implication*. He highlights that the conceptual segregation is most pronounced in the romantic landscape paintings of the 19th century, portraying a pure, pristine place devoid of humans.

As an example of the outcomes of romanticising ‘nature’, he references the first national park in the United States - Yellowstone, which was inaugurated in 1872 and depicted by Thomas Moran in the best traditions of romanticism. The aspirational wilderness of the site was acquired through a violent removal of Native Americans who used the area for subsistence by the American military in the 1870s and 1880s (p. 282)

Ecocritical art history as a discipline does not have a defining moment of origin but rather sporadic publications that have been slowly but persistently growing in number over the past two decades.

Field's first monograph - *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Theodore Rousseau* - was written by Greg M. Thomas and published in 2000. Initially trained in art history, he showed interest in ecological thought. For example, in 1991, he curated the exhibition "*The Re-Design of Nature: Graphic Constructions of Natural Space in Europe, 1760-1860*" at UCLA. As he stated, his ecocritical interest in Rousseau's work stems from the fact that the French landscapist successfully promoted the idea of the first state-established land preservation site in the Western world in the mid-19th century. In the monograph, Thomas combines an analysis of visual elements with critical theory (in particular, social lenses through which he observes figures), utilising environmentally inclined Rousseau's writings about his art, as well as contemporary critics' notions.

Thomas's monographic work, in the form of a deep and detailed research dedicated to a single artist, is rather an exception in Ecocritical Art History. More common are surveys, such as the book *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher. The collection of essays on the intersections of visual art, cultural studies, and environmental history in America is dedicated to ecological interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in artistic interpretation. Published in 2009, the book became a staple in the field. Later, Andrew Patrizio, following the footsteps of editors in 2018 with his critical art history survey, said that *Keener Perception* mapped the way for the discipline by "sketching out possible lines of ecocritical art history." Patrizio asks readers to scan a few of the entries in the index to Braddock and Irmscher's book, thinking of the range that is needed in ecocritical art history: Louis

Agassiz, agriculture, botanical illustration, Rachel Carson, civil war, class, classicism, colonialism, deforestation, environmental justice, Buckminster Fuller, glaciers, Alexander von Humboldt, the industrial revolution, labour, Life magazine, migration, mining, motion pictures, John Muir, nationalism, New York, oil painting, politics, romanticism, slavery, World War One. Indeed, essays featured in the editorial analyse many canonical figures and topics in an ecocritical light by which they have never been viewed previously. However, the same statement that highlights the diversity of Critical Art History as a discipline in general and within the *Keener Perception* in particular also hints at the possibly main challenge of the discipline - methodology. As topics of ecocritical concern vary drastically from the initial stages, the nature of ecocritical art history analysis is rather fragmentary and case-based.

In 2016, Suzan Boetter wrote an entry for the *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, titled “Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art,” in which she shares her thoughts on the past and possible future of Ecocritical Art History. She states: “In relation to literary ecocriticism, ecocritical analysis of visual art is in a nascent stage ... there is no articulated, even semi-consensual ecocritical methodology as applied to visual art.” (p. 665)

The decade between the present date and the statement of Boetter about the nascent state of Ecocritical art history was rich in book publications: released in 2018 work by A. Patrizio *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, edited by K. Kusserow in 2021 *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective* (was published following a symposium at Princeton University in connection with the exhibition *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*), A. Braddock in 2023 “*Implication: An Ecocritical Dictionary for Art History*”. A simple analysis of the words chosen in those titles suggests an essential notion about

the nature of Ecocritical Art History - eye, picture, implication - the core of the discipline is the way of perceiving art, it is about lenses. Authors are raising the same questions about methodology and the marginalised position of Ecocritical Art History within neighbouring disciplines. However, they would rather embrace the uncertainty than criticise it.

‘Attention’ is a key element in Patrizio’s *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*. He claims that there are myriad positions across art history with ecocritical potential. The future of ecocritical art history, according to Patrizio, has ‘nonhierarchy’ as a core value. After reviewing the history of the discipline in the first part of the book, he dedicates the second part to the history and methods of anarchism. ‘Mosaic’ nature of ecocritical art history here becomes a deliberate choice as the author calls for a local scale of looking at art history to be embraced and for the discipline to become more political and radical. The third and final part of the book is dedicated to new materialism¹ and posthumanism², and how their approaches can be borrowed by ecocritical art history. For example, Jane Bennett’s call for ‘cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces’ (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiv) is the exact regime of perception he envisions when talking about the ‘ecological eye’. The author explores critical animal studies and how, although numerous studies on the depiction of animals exist within art history, they remain anthropocentric - a status quo that needs to be changed. Overall, Patrizio explores the idea of drawing on

¹ New materialists consider that the world and history are produced by a range of material forces that extend from the physical and the biological to the psychological, social and cultural (Barad, 1996, p 181; Braidotti, 2013, p 3). The materiality addressed in these new materialisms is plural, open, complex, uneven and contingent (Coole and Frost, 2010, p 29); crosses boundaries between natural and social worlds; and for some new materialist scholars is invested with a vitality or liveliness, as opposed to being inert and passive matter.

² Posthumanism refers to a theoretical framework in which the human is decentered in a time of technological development, the crisis of climate change, and advanced capitalism. This perspective reevaluates the relationship between the human and the non-human world. (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 3-6)

principles from various neighbouring disciplines for ecocritical art history and highlights existing similarities in approaches.

Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective, assembled by Kusserow, is a collection of essays. He embraces the same 'nonhierarchy' with a quote: "this book is an attempt to put ecocritical art history in the hands of anyone who wishes to write it" (Kusserow et al., p. 29)

Braddock addresses the mosaic nature of the Ecocritical Art History field by defining Ecocritical Interpretation as a mode of inquiry that engages ecology as a constructive element of artistic practice in one of the most comprehensive studies in the field - *Implication: An Ecocritical Dictionary for Art History*, published in 2023. In the introduction to the book, the author states: "Each chapter unfolds as a distinct case study, probing interpretive possibilities instead of offering tidy definitions." He also explains that the usage of the word "dictionary" in the title is somewhat ironic, as instead of foreclosing discussions with coined definitions, the book instead opens up a multiplicity of interpretations. (pp. 1-2) Statement, coming from the most published author who has been working in the field of Ecocritical Art History for 20 years, cements non-methodology as the current methodology. He demonstrates the variety of approaches for the field from chapter to chapter, assigning a word to each. In the 9th chapter, he presents a case study on the topic, which is less often discussed within the discipline of critical art history: urban organisation. The depiction of the ancient Roman sewage system by Ludovico Carracci (1555-1619) in *Saint Sebastian Thrown into the Cloaca Maxima*, according to Braddock, influenced the artwork's destiny when it was commissioned.

The ecocritical approach in art history has the following similarities in the published academic writings to date:

Geography. The discipline began with research in European and American art history. Still, it aims to approach art of various origins, as evident in the title "*Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*." Case studies in the book operate primarily within two territorial modes: studying through art enmeshment beyond borders or operating within a chosen geographical unit.

Environmental twist to biographical method. Although a close look at the life of an artist is fundamental for traditional art history, the ecocritical approach slightly shifts the focus by paying exquisite attention to the amount of 'nature' the artist was exposed to during formative years or within a particular moment in practice. As an example, while introducing Edward Mitchel Bannister in the chapter dedicated to *Black Landscapes and Early Environmental justice*, Braddock starts, "Bannister was born in Canada in 1828 at a New Brunswick town named Saint Andrews, just over the Saint Croix River from eastern Maine, near Eastport ... In his late teens, he found work for several years on fishing boats and other coastal vessels, serving as a cook and learning to sail." (2023, p. 200) This attention may imply that specific entanglements, such as time spent observing water bodies whilst fishing, affect artistic practices.

'Meditation on'. In the *Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, by Andrew Patrizio, the mention of deep ecologist Arne Naess's observation that only looking at nature is a highly peculiar behaviour. "Experiencing of an environment happens by doing something in it, by living in it, meditating, and noting." (2018, p. 54) The concept is explored in other works of ecocritical art history, noting that the act of creating visual arts is a mode of experiencing the environment and requires a certain level of engagement.

Time Division. Greg M. Thomas - a pioneer of Ecocritical Art History who produced the field's first monograph, *Art and Ecology in Nineteen-Century France: The Landscapes of Theodore Rousseau* - sums up in his essay *Courbet's Ecological Realism* that he sees two main modes of Ecocritical Art History in the field: one generally interprets works of art that represent or embody ecological ideas; the other examines works of art that function as an arm of environmental activism³. Overlaps certainly occur, but for most art made before the *Silent Spring*⁴ era, beginning in the 1960s, only the representational mode applies. (Kusserow et al., 2023, p. 186)

Overall, based on the publications to date within the field of ecocritical art history, it is possible to conclude that the discipline is expanding and developing outlines of methodology.

The ecocritical art history aims to examine the environmental contexts of historical cultural artefacts through a critical lens, when scholarship can not only reshape the understanding of history but also play an active role in contemporary cultural discussions. Alan Braddock states in *A Keener Perception*, “[the discipline] may bring attention to neglected evidence of past ecological and quasi-ecological sensibility, or it may cast canonical works and figures in a new light by revealing their previously unnoticed complexity, ambivalence, or even antipathy regarding environmental concern (2009, p. 3)

³ Sources, such as M. Cheetham *Landscape into eco art* go further in stated division, claiming studies of Eco Art and Ecocritical Art History as two separated disciplines instead of one being a “mode” of another, taking in account that the recent and emerging discipline of Eco Art is yet to belong to History studies (Cheetham, 2018 pp. 1-7)

⁴ In 1962 Rachel Carson published the book titled *Silent Spring* dedicated to environmental harm caused by DDT, the publication impacted pesticide policy and started environmental movement that led to establishment of the US Environmental Protection Agency (Paull, 2013)

Aivazovsky and Bodies of Water

“If I lived another three hundred years,
I would always find something new about the sea.”⁵

I. Aivazovsky

Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900) was a Romantic painter known for his depictions of seascapes, born and for most of his life based in the Black Sea port of Feodosia (Theodosia) in Crimea, then part of the Russian Empire and now Ukraine.⁶

His heritage lies beyond the approximately 6,000 paintings he left behind — Aivazovsky was a figure who shaped the socio-cultural environment and the perception of the Crimea region. Historical documents, testimonies, and numerous biographies describe his special relationship with ‘nature’ in a dichotomous nature-culture framework. A closer look through an ‘ecological eye’ may allow us to see the practice from a slightly different angle and unveil how Aivazovsky and the environment, as separate agents, shaped each other.

To properly examine the legacy of the artist’s works and practices from the perspective of ecocritical art history, it is crucial to begin with the positionality of bodies of water within Environmental Humanities and the art history of depicting water.

⁵ quote was published in venetian paper Bazmavep in 1898 armenian, Ivan Aivazovsky, as an outspoken representative of Armenian diaspora, was connected with monastery of the Mekhitarists, an Armenian Catholic congregation, situated on the San Lazzaro degli Armeni island in Venetian lagoon where his older brother, Gabriel, was a monk. Bazmavep - the historical and philological journal, title meaning “a polymath, an erudite” - considered to be the first Armenian Scholar source. Journal is still active, focusing on scientific papers along with small pieces of fiction, was founded by Gabriel Aivazovski. (Robert, 2001, p. 147; Khachatrian 2016)

⁶ His national identities are complex. The Department of European Paintings of Metropolitan Museum of the Art currently describes Aivazovsky as “Armenian, born Russian Empire [now Ukraine]

Blue Humanities

Astrida Neimanis, a cultural theorist working at the intersection of feminism and environmental change, in her acknowledgments to the chapter titled “Water and Knowledge” from the downstream: reimagining water, mentions as collaborators a thermal hot spring in Iceland, a puddle, a ferry boat, and the childhood swimming pool (2017, p. 51). In her decades-long academic affiliation with bodies of water, Neimanis frames human bodies as a kind of water body, arguing that such an approach is a possibility for improvement in coexisting: “Bodies of water insists that if we do live as bodies ‘in common’ this commonality needs to extend beyond the human, into a more expansive sense of ‘we’.”(2017, p. 12)

In the *Bodies of water*, she mentions art as a way to relate and, at moments, as a body of water on its own - particularly the one that, within the critical art history time division, could be categorised as Eco Art. She provides an example of Rebecca Belmore’s *Fountain* (2005), an installation featured in the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale, which showcases a video projected onto a screen of running water. But could the art created before the shift towards Eco Art in the 1960s be viewed through similar optics? Is it the very phallogentrism that Neimanis challenges throughout her entire career, to look at artworks created by males within a patriarchal timeframe? The second chapter of *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, by Andrew Patrizio, is the most prominent but not the sole example within the critical art history discipline of borrowing approaches from, among others, feminist and new materialist scholars. Patrizio, through the research, references Donna Haraway and her quote “reclaiming visibility as a becoming-with or being-with” and Rosi Braidotti with “art becomes necessarily inhuman in the sense of non-human in that it connects to the animal, the vegetable, earthly and

planetary forces that surround us” (Patrizio, 2018, p. 3; p. 154) - the same authors Neimanis builds upon her studies.

Along with the chapter on Water and Knowledge, *downstream: reimagining water* offers “practice-based samples of engagement with the realm of the water,”(Christian & Wong, 2017, p. 22) including art, primarily Eco Art, but with providing some space for interpretation mode for art representing bodies of water created before the rise in ecological thought with the quote from Gary Nabhan “To restore any place ... we must also begin to re-story it, to make it the lesson of our legends, festivals, and seasonal rites. Story is the way we encode deep-seated values within our culture.”(Christian & Wong, 2017, p. 24) There are no open statements, in Neimanis’ manner, of bodies of water listed as collaborators among prominent visual artists of the past. Still, it is possible to trace more nuanced instances of ecological thinking and special relationships with bodies of water through sources such as biographies, diaries, correspondence, and notions of contemporaries.

Blue humanities is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the complex, non-hierarchical relationships between humans and bodies of water. Ecocritical art history can be one of the disciplines that touch upon this entanglement and contribute to reimagining it.

Bodies of water in visual art

Although a broad topic, the representation of bodies of water in visual art exhibits a distinct historical and geographical specificity. Davide Clarke studied it particularly attentively in *Water and Art: A Cross-cultural Study of Water as Subject and Medium in Modern and Contemporary Artistic Practice*. Before entirely

focusing, as the title suggests, on modern⁷ and contemporary⁸ art, he analyses the art history of waterscapes, focusing on European art.

Clarke discusses traditional methods of art history, specifically the iconographic method pioneered by Erwin Panofsky and its tendency to treat the content in isolation from form and how it may be challenging to apply to water in comparison to study of visual representation of a particular biblical subject - as water bodies have no singular frame that would be deemed as a place of belonging of all the artworks. (2010, pp. 7-10)

The frame of Clarke's research within critical art history shall be reviewed in conversation with alternative perspectives, as *Water and Art* inherited anthropocentric traits from classical Western Philosophy, Religion, and Science, from which the discipline of art history emerged, "hierarchy treating everything other than human as inert object to be used, studied, and owned by humans." (Braddock, 2023, pp. 90-91)

Water, Clarke states, was portrayed through the eras of art history in all cultures; however, the angle of directness of the subject changed in the early 19th century in European and American art. Another drastic change occurred in the late 20th century, where eco art (or activist art, as mentioned in the previous chapter) further revealed water bodies as agents, co-creators, or sites for art. Historical patterns, such as the shared concern among Romantic⁹ painters with the theme of

⁷ As an art historical term, Modern art refers to that of being created roughly from 1860s to 1960s and shares philosophies of the period - a radically new approach to past and present, particularly more focusing on portraying current events rather than historical (Atkins, 1990, p. 119)

⁸ Art created in the present day, typically referring to works produced from the 1970s onwards (Smith, 2009, p. 34)

⁹ Romanticism in art, a movement spanning the late 18th and 19th centuries, is characterized by its emphasis on emotion, imagination, and the individual experience (Allert, 2004, p. 274)

the storm-tossed boat, or late 19th-century Europe's focus on the drowning, could be found quite evidently. (2010, pp. 10-16)

Leonardo da Vinci: The Water Studies

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), whose *Arno Landscape* is recognised as one of the earliest autonomous landscape sketches in art history (Zöllner, 2000, p. 10), despite practising studies from 'nature', chose a somewhat schematic rather than realistic way of depicting water bodies in his major artworks. With an example of *Madonna of the Rocks* (Figure 1), art historians argue that the schematisation of a waterscape, employed by Leonardo and other artists of the time, was used to avoid overpowering the main scene. Schematic depictions of bodies of water were used for a long time after Leonardo Da Vinci; for instance, Canaletto's Venice scenes have somewhat repetitive schemas for depicting the surfaces of his canals (Figure 2). The body of the canal is relatively less detailed and studied, and the agenda of water as a subject was purposely reduced, as the focal point would be elements of human-made nature and the utilisation of the body of water for transportation (Clarke, 2010, p. 20)

It is not the water bodies in the background of the *Mona Lisa* or *Madonna of the Rocks* that draw the interest of historical studies towards Leonardo's practices. As a polymath, an individual whose knowledge spans many different subjects, while practising as an engineer and scientist throughout life, he worked on an excellent treatise on water.¹⁰

The project was never finished, but Leonardo's *Water Studies* - hundreds of notes and drawings were preserved. Sketches of the *Water Studies* have a scientific

¹⁰ researches, such as Martin Kemp's *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvelous Works of Nature and Man* (2006) mention his profound interest in water that amounts to almost obsession, but more of scientific or hydrological rather than fully artistic, at one point Leonardo made a list of 67 terms that can be used to describe water flow.



Figure 1. Leonardo Da Vinci. (1483–1486) *Madonna of the Rocks*. Louvre Museum. Paris, France



Figure 2. Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal). (1730s) *The Grand Canal, Venice, Looking South toward the Rialto Bridge*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York, USA

undertone. The author, while depicting water as a force, attempts to understand the logic of movement and the patterns it creates. Leonardo had various research interests, which he illustrated, and overlaps could be found in many instances. For example, a note on *12579* (Figure 3) - the page featuring four studies of water turbulence caused by obstacles in moving water - mentions observations of human anatomy, particularly the resemblance between the movement of hair and that of water. (Clarke, 2010, p. 23)

Thinking through analogies, Leonardo saw parallels between the human body and nature as a whole, with veins playing an equivalent role to rivers in sustaining life, and his studies of turbulence found relevance for his investigation of the functioning of the heart valve (Kemp, 2007, p. 296)



Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci. (c. 1508-1509). *Old Man with Water Studies* #12579. Royal Library. Windsor, UK

It is challenging to determine whether the comparisons between the human body and water bodies made by Leonardo da Vinci share similarities with those by posthuman feminist Astrida Neimanis or if they are entirely opposite. Leonardo's understanding of water comes from practices of long observation of various water bodies and precipitation; however, the purpose of those observations and the relationship with the environment is rather human-centred than posthuman. He explores how to reclaim and commodify the knowledge of bodies of water. For example, Leonardo was involved in a plan by the Florentines to divert the flow of the River Arno from Pisa, and he developed a proposal for making the Arno navigable to the sea through a canal that would alter its flow route. (Clarke 2010, p. 24) However, his study and artistic practices are a notable example of environmental attention in art history.

Bodies of water in 19th-Century Western Art: Sublime, Drowning, and Mermaids

The schematic representation of bodies of water persisted until the early 19th century, when visual art began to engage with them more profoundly. One artist engaged with waterscapes more profoundly than all others: Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851).

Contemporary critic William Hazlitt (1778-1830), in a 1816 reference to Turner's works, describes him as someone who “delighted to go back to the first chaos of the world... All is without form and void” (Hazlitt, 1816), placing the artist’s environmental narratives within a biblical framework. Religious sensations related to the perception of visual art shifted in the 19th century from direct portrayal to Romanticism’s approach of depicting ‘nature’ to evoke the aesthetic feeling of sublimity, an ultimately religious sense of man’s smallness in the face of Nature’s (or God’s) power. Because of this task at hand, the water bodies were represented either



Figure 4. Joseph Mallord William Turner. (1820s). *Sea View*. Scottish National Gallery Of Modern Art. Edinburgh, UK



Figure 5. Joseph Mallord William Turner. (1802). *Fishermen upon a Lee-Shore, in Squally Weather*. Southampton City Art Gallery. Southampton, UK

as forceful, stormy, untamed, with some vessel that allowed a fragile human presence to be introduced as a counterpoint, or ethereally calm.¹¹

¹¹ Eitner, L. (1955). The open window and the storm-tossed boat: an essay in the iconography of Romanticism. *The Art Bulletin*, 37(4), 281-290.

Through the evolution of his career, Turner transitioned from depicting anthropocentric drama (Figure 5) to making bodies of water the primary subject (Figure 4).

In the second half of the 19th century, the theme of drowning, the implicit core of the subject of the shipwreck, came to be addressed more directly in its own right. With water bodies remaining an essential element, emphasis shifts towards the drama of human interactions with them. Whilst Sublime offers spiritual sensations from a contact with ‘nature’ as a whole, evoking a sensation of awe, images of drowning are more direct, calling for empathy or prompting social action (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Josef Israels. (1861). *Fishermen Carrying a Drowned Man*. National Gallery. London, UK

Similarly, Ilya Repin’s *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870–73) portrays exhausted men dragged along a river, visualising human suffering set in ‘nature’ rather than offering a depiction of an idealized version of landscape. Although it does not directly belong to the topic of drowning, there are evidently similarities in the shift towards anthropocentric drama.

Action figures portrayed within the theme of drowning tend to have a gender distinction - male figures are depicted within the professional occupation, such as fishermen or navy soldiers, whilst female figures are portrayed within the narrative of suicide and begin to occur more often in the late 19th century, particularly in England. (Figure 7) This further fortifies the position of the depiction of drowning as a social topic. (Clarke, 2010, pp. 48-52)

Female relationships with bodies of water are also expressed through the motif of a mermaid - a hybrid creature of a human female and aquatic creatures presented in the eroticised theme of the femme fatale, treated by Burne-Jones or Leighton.



Figure 7. George Frederic Watts. (1850). *Found Drowned*. Watts Gallery. Compton, UK

The mermaid figure is essential, as it transforms the way bodies of water are portrayed, transporting the viewer into the underwater world. Although the 19th century was the period of advances in scientific underwater research: the early experiments in underwater photography, or the development of the public aquarium

(the first public aquarium opened at Regent's Park in London in 1853, then another in Naples Aquarium in 1873), there is, with some exceptions, no traceable close parallels in depiction of said spaces, as the artworks remain figure drawings with focus on mythic or literary subject. (Clarke, 2010)

Ivan Aivazovsky

For the given period, the 19th century, and geography - Crimean Peninsula just acquired by the Russian Empire - is relatively uncommon to have access to various sources of biographical information; however, in the case of Aivazovsky, despite being of non-noble origin, due to his joining a reputable institution of the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg and being critically acclaimed from the very young age till his last days, we have a traceable chain of testimonies, including artist's correspondence collected and published in 1967 in cooperation between art historians and the central archive of Armenia,¹² mentions by contemporary colleagues, critics and art collectors, and modern research across Armenia, Russia, Ukraine and Turkey.

For the accurate positioning of a historical personality before implementing the chronological approach to analysing biography, the body of work and artistic practices, an essential historical data point to consider is the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in 1783.

The Russian Empire grew from Muscovite Russia in the 15th century and incorporated Crimea in 1783. As summarised in O'Neil's *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great's Southern Empire*, Crimea was seen at the time as 'wild and unpossessed', devoid of European civilisation. Here, the 'radiant light' of tsarist rule conjured cities and farms, creating a comfortingly familiar landscape of

¹² Aivazovsky: documents and materials, 1967 (in Russian)

cultivation and habitation. Still, even if imperial officials had failed in that project, the exotic nature of the region was something in which any true Russian could exult, for Crimea was, at root, Russian land, “inhabited by Russians, then known as European Scythians, from the most ancient of times.” In the minds of those who followed this logic, 1783 marked not the expansion of the organic boundaries of the Russian core but a moment of reclamation or restoration. (O’Neil, 2017, p. 4)



Figure 8. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1883) *Arrival of Catherine II in Feodosia*. The Aivazovsky National Art Gallery. Feodosia, Ukraine

For the 100th anniversary of the Russian control of the Crimean land, Aivazovsky created “Arrival of Catherine II in Feodosia” in 1883. Although the actual historical event happened in 1787, when the empress of the Russian Empire visited the town, Aivazovsky was not yet born. He recalls childhood memories of the city from the early 19th century - the mountain range of Tepe-Oba, surrounded by a ring of medieval ancient towers and fortress walls, approaching the seashore.

The purpose of the empress's long journey across Crimea was to demonstrate to Western Europe, represented by the foreigners participating in the trip, the value of the lands acquired by Russia. The trip lasted six months, and Feodosia was the final destination.

The royal train arrived in Feodosia on May 28, 1787. Catherine II and her companions visited the former Khan's mint, where two gold medals were made in memory of the journey. These medals were presented to Catherine II and Emperor Joseph II of Austria, who, incognito, had participated in the trip. (O'Neil, 2017, pp. 7-8)

Aivazovsky pictured Catherine and her escort on the seashore, awaiting the ships to take them back to Saint Petersburg. As the purpose of the trip was to represent the value of the new to the Russian Empire territory, so was the purpose of the artistic career of Aivazovsky, who from the very beginning had full support from the imperial court¹³. All the landscape elements align in the idyllic moment - waves run up the sandy shore, leaving a lacy trace of foam on the yellow sand. Light white clouds float across the high blue sky. A misty, transparent haze has thickened at the horizon. All the colours are slightly muted, as is usually the case on a clear and quiet summer day. As no historical notice exists to specify the exact weather conditions on the day of the event, we can assume that the pictorial choice was made rather as a tool to make a political statement, where accepting and welcoming a new political regime can go beyond the population of the territory and expand to the agency of land and water. Aivazovsky portrays the Crimean coast as a stage of imperial triumph. The painting does not address histories of ecological disruption, rather is staging land and the body of water as willing collaborators of colonization.

¹³ Similar observations were made about Turner in *JMW Turner and the Subject of History*: "A number of factors combined in the first decades of the nineteenth century to make Turner's seascapes particularly important to his developing career. First, seascapes had become increasingly prominent as a means of negotiating and creating British national and imperial identity." (2012)

Romantic-picturesque harmony masks colonial violence, and the sea is aestheticized as a loyal subject to Catherine's empire. The painting suggests timeless imperial dominion through calm natural cycles (daylight, calm tide).

Aivazovsky's studies on Art and Water

Born in 1817 in Feodosia, he had an Armenian father and a Crimean Tatar mother, and was baptised as Hovhannes Aivazian in the Armenian Church. Aivazovsky, from an early age, was drawn towards painting. Reviewing the history of his studies reveals multiple notions about his relationships with 'nature'.

Yakov Koch, the principal architect of Feodosia at the time, gave him his first lessons in painting. After graduating from the Feodosia district school, Aivazovsky was enrolled in the Simferopol gymnasium, where he was promoted to the Imperial Academy of Arts. (Korolev, 2004, p. 70)

After being admitted to the Imperial Academy in 1833, Aivazovsky remained a part of the institution throughout his entire career. (Aghasyan 2017, p. 121) At the moment of admission, according to the institution's rules, Aivazovsky was too young to be a student; however, with recommendation letters from the administration of Crimea and attached to them samples of artworks, an exception was made. Painted from life, or en plein air, the landscapes granted enrollment, scholarship, and special attention from the Emperor. (pp. 10-12) At the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg, he trained under the supervision of the French painter of seascapes, Philippe Tanneur (1795-1878), Alexander Sauerweid (1783-1844), a German who taught battle painting, and the Russian landscape painter Maksim Vorobyov (1787-1855).

Charles, in *Ivan Aivazovsky and Russian Painters of Water*, implies that the choice of European artists to teach in the Imperial Academy of Arts heavily influenced the rise in popularity of landscape painting in the Russian Empire:

At first, this landscape was viewed through the filters of a Western-trained eye and mainly consisted of idyllic European scenery. However, by the end of the century, Russian paintings of water and land had become closely associated with the Russian landscape and had taken on a distinctly Russian character. (2018, p. 9)

Aivazovsky's studies in Saint Petersburg continued till 1738 and included both practices from life and producing copies of landscapes. Tanneur, his teacher in the academy, often instructed Aivazovsky to make preparatory drawings from life and to prepare paints. Also, the formation of I. Aivazovsky's picture of the world was facilitated by numerous copies of works by old masters and contemporaries, such as S. Shchedrin, K. Bryullov, F. Bruni, as well as masters of Dutch marine painting (Dubels, Schotel), the main feature of which is the all-encompassing nature, a high point of view on nature. (Shevchuk 2025, p. 97)

Aivazovsky returned to Crimea in 1738 as a scholar of the academy, for the practical part of his studies on the depiction of 'nature'. Notions about his practices of the times could be found in personal correspondence, such as the letter to A. Tomilov:¹⁴

March 17, 1839, Feodosia

What to do? One of my shortcomings, which is hard to break the habit of, is putting everything off. Apart from strong impressions [from] moments of nature, [after] which I eagerly await the moment when I will begin to draw, and in other cases, I admit that I am very careless ... How many changes in

¹⁴ Aleksey Tomilov was an influential Russian art philanthropist and collector, one of the founders of the aesthetic theory of Russian Romanticism. (Bodunova 2017)

my ideas about nature, how many new delights I have achieved, and how many are lying ahead, seemingly hidden behind the golden horizon, which takes a long time to reach. (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 26)

Or the one to the president of the Imperial Academy, where he mentions *Moonlit night in Crimea* (Figure 9):

August 13, 1839, Feodosia

Upon arrival in Crimea, after a brief meeting with my relatives, I immediately headed to the southern coast, where the luxurious nature, the majestic sea, and picturesque mountains presented the artist with numerous subjects of high poetry in person.

I know that in this painting of mine, the moon is a coin, but there was nothing to hide it behind. But who painted not only the moon, but even the moonlight as strongly as it is in nature? All painting is a weak imitation of nature. (Sargasyan, 1967, pp. 27-28)

In the letter to the president of the Imperial Academy, Aivazovsky requests to join Russian naval general Raevsky on his military mission in the Caucasus region, in his own words, “to survey the natural beauty of the little-known eastern shores of the Black Sea ... [I] desire to see a naval battle in such a luxurious natural setting and have the thought that the depiction on canvas of the military exploits of our heroes would be pleasing to His Imperial Majesty.” The request was accepted, and continued a lifelong affiliation of the artist with the Naval Forces of the Russian Empire (Sargasyan, 1967, pp. 29-31)

In *The Routledge Companion to Art and the Formation of Empire*, Fatma Coşkuner, an art historian from Koç University in Turkey, explores the relation of Aivazovsky to Russian imperialism. Her chapter, *Meditating on Aivazovsky’s Black Sea: Representing Russian Imperial Expansion*, is dedicated to “visualising the sea

as a social place” when the Russian Empire was establishing its dominance in the region, and the Black Sea functioned as a military border. (p. 83)



Figure 9. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1839). *Moonlit night in Crimea. Gurzuf*. Nikanor Onatsky Regional Art Museum. Sumy, Ukraine

As previously mentioned, Aivazovsky himself claimed that his participation in the military expedition was to explore ‘nature’; however, describing events of the practice, he mentions being armed with a gun, exiting to the shore during one of the missions, and accommodating a wounded soldier back to his ship.

Landing of N. Raevsky in Subashi (Figure 10), as he mentions in the correspondence with the Imperial Academy of Arts, was finished in his studio in Feodosia, based on numerous sketches drawn from nature during three rounds of the mission with Raevsky. (Sargasyan, 1967, pp. 31-33)



Figure 10. Ivan Aivazovsky (1839) *Landing of N.N. Raevsky in Subashi*. Samara Art Museum. Samara, Russia

In those early paintings Aivazovsky showed his range within the marine genre. *Moonlit Night* is romantic, staging the sea as agent on its own, as a sublime force; *Landing of Raevsky* is sharp and precise, staging the sea as a set for anthropocentric imperial action.

In *Moonlit Night in Crimea*, we can see a sublime mystery of more-than-human forces. By contrast, the *Landing of N. N. Raevsky in Subashi* is hyperrealistic, with harsh outlines and a detailed recording of ships, coastline, and figures. Here, the sea loses its agency and becomes a stage, subordinated to the specific military event. In *Moonlit Night*, the body of water emerges more as a living collaborator, resonating with Romantic and Blue Humanities approaches; in the *Landing of Raevsky*, water is reduced to an infrastructural backdrop, instrumentalized within the colonial project.

In 1840, the Imperial Academy approved the decision to send Aivazovsky to continue his studies abroad. In the primary destination country, Italy, the artist spent two years between Rome and Naples.

The greatest master of romantic landscape, the English painter William Turner, who then lived in Rome, greeted the young mariner and dedicated to him a self-composed poem:

.....

Oh thou young boy, but forgive thou me,

If I shall bend my white head

Before thy art divine

Thy bliss-wrought genius... (Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1841)



Figure 11. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1842) *The Bay of Naples by Moonlight*. Aivazovsky Gallery. Feodosia, Ukraine



Figure 12. Joseph Mallord William Turner. (1823). *The Bay of Baiae*. Tate Gallery. London, UK

Pilikian, in his article on *Turner and Aivazovsky*, suggests that *The Bay of Naples by Moonlight* (Figure 11) is a mirror/reverse image of William Turner's painting titled *The Bay of Baiae*, highlighting the proximity of the practices of the two artists. (1990, p. 2) However, just around the time when *The Bay of Naples by Moonlight* was created, Aivazovsky decided to make a shift in his artistic process. He defines new principles of interacting with 'nature', particularly with bodies of water.

His aim, since studying in Saint Petersburg, was to make prolonged observations to employ them further while working in a studio (from the annotation to the annual exhibition in the Imperial Academy of Arts):

All summer, we saw the artist in Peterhof, at Znamenskaya Manor, a tireless observer of these elements that had so happily captured our imagination. We saw how greedily, like an ant, he stocked up on memories for the long three seasons of the year ahead, when northern nature drives the artist into dark studios, hiding its gloomy beauty, and forces them to live by memory alone. (Art Newspaper, 1837, p. 319)

The statement assumes that the approach of accumulating observations was used due to the extreme weather conditions in Saint Petersburg year-round, except during the summer months.

While publishing autobiographical notes, Aivazovsky mentions the first years spent in Southern Italy, where the climate is suitable for painting from nature for most of the year, states that the approach is a deliberate choice rather than necessity: “A painter who merely copies nature becomes its slave, bound hand and foot.” Reflecting on his Italian period, the artist contrasted works painted directly from nature with those composed from memory. Although his Sorrento views, executed with “photographic accuracy,” attracted little attention, the landscapes created in the studio under the “influence of inspiration” — a sunset and a sunrise — drew crowds and received the most praise. The episode illustrates the tension between academic naturalism and the Romantic valorization of subjective vision. (Karatygin, 1878)

Aivazovsky recalls combining elements observed in different places:

The storm I saw off the coast of Italy, I transferred on my painting to some place in the Crimea or the Caucasus; I remembered a ray of moonlight reflected in the Bosphorus, then depicted it illuminating the strongholds of

Sevastopol. Such is the quality of my brush and the characteristic feature of my artistic style.

(Karatygin, 1878)

The artist, in his letter, emphasized the role of “artistic memory,” describing it as a gift that allowed him to recall with clarity scenes witnessed decades earlier, and to translate them into painted form.

Fedor Chizhov¹⁵ while describing the paintings Aivazovsky created on the Italian voyage in 1840-1842 writes in his diary:

In Aivazovsky's sea and sky, there is a tangible, if one can say so, belonging to Baratynsky's verse: The star book was clear to him

And the sea wave spoke to him. ...

If the sea had not spoken to him, if it had not told him the cherished secrets of its soul, neither study nor work would have helped him at all.

While describing *the Bay of Naples on a moonlit night* (Figure 11), Chizhov states: “here everything belongs to the sea, to which the artist gave half of his being.”

In notes on *Azure grotto. Naples* (Figure 13), Chizhov writes that in comparison to other artists approaching the same body of water, Aivazovsky's painting is the most representative of the place.

While many Italian painters depicted the grotto simplistically blue, Aivazovsky looks deeper into the play of refracted sunlight on the water and rocks. His attention to the shifting light effects made the work not only a poetic image, but a more accurate record of Capri's famous ecological site. (Sargasyan, 1967, pp. 57-58)

¹⁵ F. Chizhov (1811-1877) - Russian writer. In 1840-1847 he traveled around Italy, collected works of art, and wrote articles about the practice of Russian artists in Italy.

During his studies in Italy, Aivazovsky corresponded with the institution that sponsored him, the Imperial Academy of Arts, as well as with his numerous patrons and colleagues, sending finished works to exhibitions in Saint Petersburg and requesting feedback.



Figure 13. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1941). *Azure grotto. Naples*. Donetsk Regional Art Museum. Donetsk, Ukraine

Commenting on *Azure grotto. Naples* (Figure 13), Tomilov, his art collector, writes:

I see a feeling in you, your soul is excited with the phenomena of nature, and your freedom conveys what amazes, comforts, and amuses your feelings. Water! Air! The beautiful light splashes in the water - lovely. Only a few people in the world are capable of feeling so much, so novel ... The shores are there only to ignore them, to admire the contrast, the turbidity and darkness: air and water flaunting. (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 61)

What both Tomilov and Chizhov are pointing out about *Azure grotto* is a unique attention to the entanglement of nature's agents - body of water, rocks, and

air. This attention is a mode of ecological observation, a research on the site-specific system that needed to portray elements so realistically. There is an assumed contrast between ‘other artists’ who saw the cave in blue lights and depicted it as blue, and Aivazovsky, who studied why non-blue elements appeared as such and re-created the phenomena through his artistic techniques. Aivazovsky makes the sea itself the painter. The blue glow is not a pigmentary effect imposed by the artist but the outcome of sunlight refracted and transformed through water and rock.

During his stay in Italy from 1940 to 1942, Aivazovsky was received warmly and praised as a professional; his works were acquired by the king of Naples and Pope Gregory XVI. The latest, *Chaos (The Creation)* (Figure 14), was initially displayed in the Vatican and transferred in 1905 to the museum of the Mkhitarist monastery on the island of St. Lazarus, Venice, where it remains.

Chaos (The Creation) references the verse of Genesis 1:2: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

Addressing a religious topic so directly is a rare moment for Aivazovsky. During his stay in Rome, he recalls studying the works of Michelangelo and Rafael: “Looking at the works of geniuses and giants, you feel your insignificance! Here a day is worth a year,” he admitted in letters to St. Petersburg and said: “I, like a bee, suck honey from a flower.” (Karatygin, 1878, p. 426)

The duality of Romanticism is based on the dichotomy and collision of opposing forces. In this case, the transcendental figure (vision) of God and the vibrant material nature are expressions of the dialectics of opposites, embodying both peace and turbulence.

The collision of the opposing energies is resolved, and it is through God that Romantic instability is balanced. Framing the elemental sea within a

Romantic-religious context, the painting plays into the hierarchy where divine authority, and by extension human authority, dominates the unruly agency of nature.



Figure 14. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1841). *Chaos (The Creation)*. Armenian Monastery Mechitarist. Venice, Italy

The collision of the opposing energies is resolved, and it is through God that Romantic instability is balanced. Framing the elemental sea within a Romantic-religious context, the painting plays into the hierarchy where divine authority, and by extension human authority, dominates the unruly agency of nature.

The unexpected, at a first glance, location of *Chaos (The Creation)* today - on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni in Venice, is explained by Aivazovsky's deep ties to the Mekhitarist Armenian community. During his Italian travels, he stayed on

the monastery island, where his brother Gabriel was at the moment a part of the order. The Mekhitarists acquired the canvas directly after its early display in Rome. The monastery, known for collecting manuscripts, artworks, and scientific instruments, is preserving *Chaos (The Creation)* as part of its archive of Armenian heritage in the diaspora. Ecocritically, the work's setting is significant and probably has the most metaphorically rich location out of all artworks of Aivazovsky on display at the moment: a painting that visualizes the cosmic birth of sea and sky now situated within a fragile ecosystem that itself lives at the threshold of land and water, negotiating survival on a tidal island. In this way, *Chaos(The Creation)* embodies both: creation myth and cultural resilience, with its location being an example of how unexpectedly Aivazovsky's art circulated across imperial, diasporic, and ecological boundaries.

Venice, the lagoon city, was one of his earliest encounters with Western Europe. There, he painted views of the canals and islands, including *View on the Lagoon of Venice* and *San Lazzaro degli Armeni*. These Venetian canvases mark a shift toward atmospheric studies in which light, water, and stone interact as equal forces with human-made structures. In Venice, he observed a city literally built on water, where its survival depended on the delicate balance between human construction and lagoon ecology. (Bodunova, 2007)

Alexandre Benois (1870-1960), on Aivazovsky's interests:

None of the artists in Russia reached such a height as to be interested in the tragedy of the universe or the power and beauty of natural phenomena. Only Aivazovsky was lit up with inspired delight from the magnificence of the cosmos, which appeared for [him] as a living, organic, and even rational and passionate creature. (1916)

In 1842, Aivazovsky left Italy but continued his studies abroad, visiting Paris, England, and the Netherlands. After returning to the Russian Empire in 1844, Aivazovsky was awarded the title of Academician by the Imperial Academy of Arts and appointed as the official painter of the Naval Ministry, with the right to wear the uniform of the Imperial Navy.

Alexander Ivanov (1806 - 1858), a Russian painter from St. Petersburg who spent most of his artistic career in Italy, wrote about the relationships of Aivazovsky and the Naval Ministry in the new title:

He was provided with ship schemes, drawings of ship rigging, and weapons, among other items. When Aivazovsky needed to check his observations of a cannonball ricocheting across the water surface, live charges were fired specially for him in Kronstadt. Aivazovsky is present on a warship during naval manoeuvres in the Gulf of Finland. (Botkin, 1880)

Aivazovsky's memories of the alliance are more poetic: "The effects of the reflection of sun rays in clouds of gunpowder smoke, quickly rising to the sky or smoothly spreading across the surface of the Gulf [of Finland], are deeply etched in my memory". (Botkin, 1880)

As he finished his studies, Ivan Aivazovsky left St. Petersburg.

Feodosia and narratives of Crimea

In 1845, Aivazovsky decided to return to his town of origin, Feodosia. The relocation came as a surprise to colleagues - embedded in the social life of the Russian Empire's capital, the young painter was expected to stay in Saint Petersburg to advance his career at the Imperial Academy of Arts, in close proximity to art patrons, noble elites, and the emperor himself. But he believed in the great potential

of the city of Feodosia. Here is a statement by the artist that we find on the pages of the magazine *Russian Antiquity* from 1881:

Whether it is because my soul lies with the place of my birth and childhood, which is dear to me, or because of the significant verse: “the smoke of the Fatherland is sweet and pleasant to us”, but in the misty distance of the years I see Feodosia as a clean, tidy town, <...> not lacking in potential for a bright, blessed future - of which I am sure.

Crimea was not the only coastal territory of the Russian Empire, yet nowhere else was there such a pronounced identity. (O'Neill, 2017, p 25) What Aivazovsky sees as “the smoke of the Fatherland that is pleasant to us” - the idea that even negative attributes of the place where you were born are alluring because of its familiarity. However, not only those who were born in Crimea were able to find it enchanting. The decision to settle in Crimea for Aivazovsky was not a case of seeking solitude. Despite the region's peripheral position within the empire and the threat of war from Turkey, land in Crimea was a highly desirable asset among the Russian nobility.

In 1845, Aivazovsky purchased a small plot of land with a garden on the southern coast of Crimea. He praised the region's climate and evergreen plants. Despite the acquisition being unprofitable, he claimed to value the site more highly than any Italian villa. It was the beginning of the excessive accumulation of land by Aivazovsky in Crimea. (Sargasyan, 1967, p 90)

The house of Aivazovsky in Feodosia has become a destination to visit during the Summer. Journalist Vasily Krivenko, who was vacationing at Aivazovsky's, described his observations in detail and vividly - how Aivazovsky was renowned in Feodosia as a sociable and generous host, whose home stood open to a diverse crowd of just regular people from the town, state officials, and noble visitors from Saint

Petersburg. Respected as a local patriarch, he mobilized support for projects such as the port, railway, water supply, and mountain afforestation, turning personal hospitality into a form of cultural and urban leadership. (Losev, 2017)

Feodosia became a place of exploration for Ivan Aivazovsky. Now, when his house became a museum full of artworks, we can read in a curatorial statement that the key to the visual accuracy of his paintings was the practice of observing nature, in particular, that Aivazovsky watched every sunrise and sunset from the beach, except for when he was not in town. There is no documentation to prove such a commitment; however, the body of work produced by Aivazovsky includes numerous depictions of the coastline of Feodosia with the sun just slightly above the horizon. We can see the accentuated duality of the culture-nature narrative in *Feodosia. Sunrise* (Figure 15). He subtly references the military history of Feodosia by including in the painting the tower of Saint Konstantin, which was built in the 14th century when the town was part of the Republic of Genoa. (Lavrov, 2021, p. 160)

Without specific knowledge of the site, it is difficult to discern the aggressive military purpose of the human-made construction depicted. Within the two primary states of bodies of water that Aivazovsky tends to portray - aggressive human-crashing storms and calm water providing recreational ecosystem services for humans - the Black Sea in *Feodosia. Sunrise* belongs to the latest.

The picturesque harmony of coexistence between humans and bodies of water catered to the public's desire for a peaceful moment, just as the Crimean War was about to unfold. The calm Black Sea reflects the first light of day, creating a sense of peace and balance. From an ecocritical view, the painting brings together two stories: the sea as a living force that moves through endless cycles of tides and sunrises, and the fortress as a sign of human militaristic conflict and control. By softening the fortress into the background, Aivazovsky turns a place marked by war

into a picturesque scene, presenting Feodosia's fragile environment as both beautiful and politically charged.

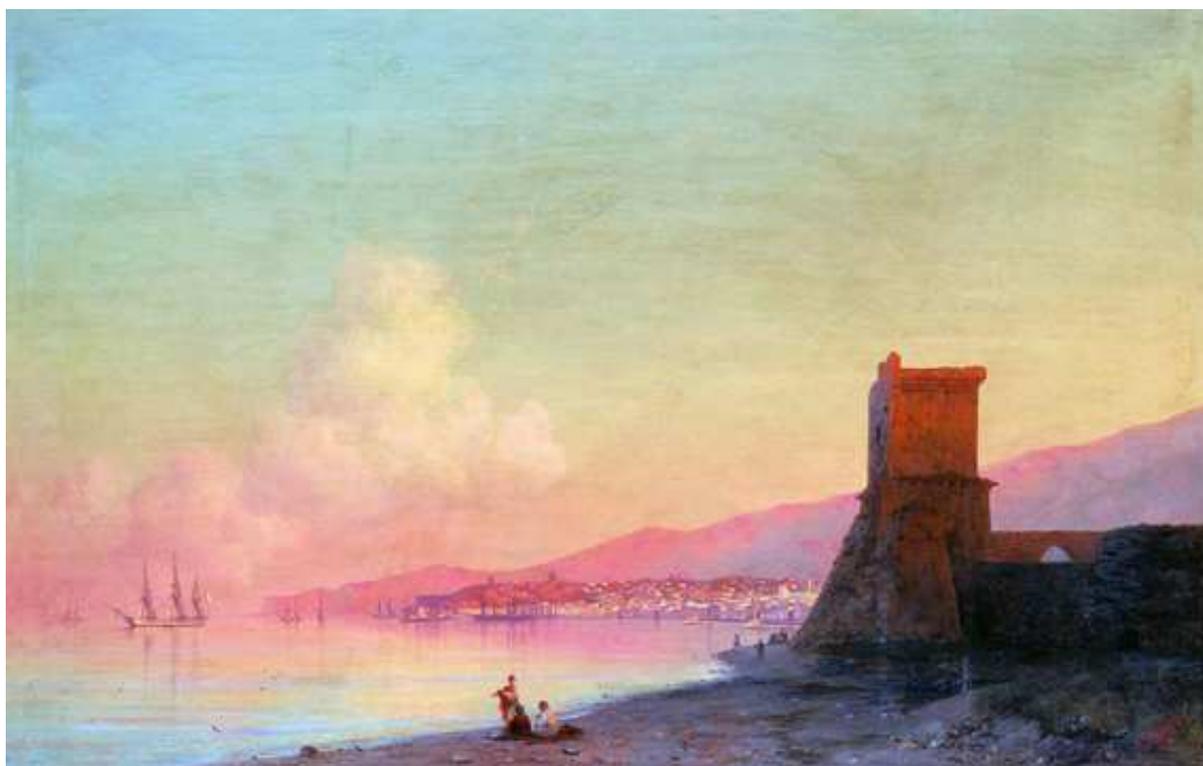


Figure 15. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1853). *Feodosia. Sunrise*. Karelia Art Museum. Petrozavodsk, Russia

In pursuit of exploring not only the environment of Crimea but also its history, Aivazovsky participated in an archaeological expedition in the summer of 1853 and became a member of the Russian Geographical Society. He was driven by the desire to find material evidence of the antiquity of his native city, its belonging to the important cultural centres of the ancient world. Ivan Aivazovsky entrusted the supervision of the excavations to his nephew, Levon Mazirov, and hired farmers from Feodosia to assist with the work. Excavations of the burial mounds on the slopes of Mount Tepe-Oba began at the end of June.

The curator of the Museum of Antiquities, Yevgeny Frantsevich de Villeneuve, reported on the results of Aivazovsky's archaeological work to the Odessa Society of History and Antiquities:

Twenty-two burial mounds have been opened. In most of them, only broken amphorae, ashes, coal, and burnt bones were found. The following items were found in four burial mounds: gold necklaces, earrings, a woman's head, a chain with a sphinx, a sphinx with a woman's head, a bull's head, plates, silver bracelets, clay figurines, medallions, vessels, and a sarcophagus, as well as silver and bronze coins.

Aivazovsky sent his best works to the Imperial Hermitage, where they remain to this day, continuing the exploitative tradition of empires to extract valuable archaeological finds from annexed lands.

Doctor of Historical Sciences Eleonora Petrova sums up the main results of the archaeological work of Aivazovsky: excavations of the necropolis of ancient Feodosia of the 5th-3rd centuries BC brought material evidence that on the territory of Feodosia (medieval Kaffa), there once was a Hellenic site. The rarities discovered aroused general admiration and helped to awaken interest in archaeology and the historical past of the city. (Petrova, 2015)

As political tension rose in the region in 1854, Aivazovsky entirely shifted his focus to naval battles. He left Crimea due to the war; however, he insisted on exhibiting his paintings in Sevastopol, which at the moment was the epicentre of the Crimean War (1853-1854). He explained that later in his autobiography it was important "To expose paintings for the judgement of sailors who participated in the very battles that I chose as the subject for the paintings." (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 333) He personally accompanied paintings to the warzone and changed them according to the corrections provided by soldiers. (Basimov, 1962, pp. 82-83)

The destiny of Sevastopol as the strategic location of the Naval Forces of the Russian Empire and, as a consequence, the main target of the Crimean War of 1853-1854, was predetermined by its environment. A narrow entrance to the

Sevastopol Bay, as pictured in the painting, the *Siege of Sevastopol* (Figure 16), allows for easier protection of the fleet located inside.



Figure 16. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1854-1859) *Siege of Sevastopol*. Aivazovsky Gallery. Feodosia, Ukraine

This time, the frame of Aivazovsky's painting belongs more to the sky than the sea, with anthropogenic clouds of fumes from explosions blending into non-anthropogenic ones. Recurring motif of naval battles in the art of Aivazovsky is an example of a mode of colonial and environmentally destructive ways of thinking about water that is similar to that described by Bailey-Charteris Bronwyn in *The Hydrocene: Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water*, where Bodies of Water are reduced to their function as a site in a moment of history. However, Aivazovsky still renders the water with care, reminding us of its power and fragility amid destruction. The work turns the sea into both a victim and a witness of imperial conflict.

Just before the Crimean War started in 1853, Aivazovsky made an attempt to create an art school for children in his home region, Crimea, claiming that the environment there could contribute a lot to art practice, but the request was unsuccessful as the financial support was denied. (Sargasyan, 1967, pp. 109-110). Lately, he successfully opened an art school connected to his studio in 1865. As he

sent the request for permission, he stated concerns about the lack of local art education and the destiny of Crimean aspiring artists who, due to poverty, are incapable of completing their studies in the capital of the Russian Empire. (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 338)

This is not only an example of Aivazovsky's efforts in forming a cultural scene in the region, but also another notion of his ideas about the connection of art and environment.

In 1871, Ivan Aivazovsky built a new building for the Museum of Antiquities at his own expense. It towered over Mithridate Hill, at the foot of which was the house where the artist was born. Aivazovsky very subtly grasped the style in which the building should be erected here, on the top of the mountain, so that it would become the architectural dominant of the city. The work was entrusted to Professor of the Imperial Academy of Arts Alexander Rezanov. Externally, the museum resembled the colonnade of the Athenian Acropolis, as if returning Feodosians to the times of the foundation of the ancient city. This action, along with others, led to proclaiming Aivazovsky an honourable citizen of the town of Feodosia and led to the next urban reorganisations. In recognition of his contributions, Feodosia honoured Aivazovsky by naming landmarks after him: the hill of the antiquities museum he founded, the street leading to the cathedral past his birthplace, and a new coastal boulevard along his residence. (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 181)

Aivazovsky became an influential figure - a prominent social benefactor and patron, whose exploitative view on bodies of water goes beyond artistic work, as he plays a vital role in industrialisation and the redistribution of natural resources.

For example, the government's decision to build a large commercial port in Feodosia required a significant amount of effort from the artist. At first, the location of a new trading port was decided in favour of Sevastopol. When Aivazovsky learned

about this, the artist went to Saint Petersburg and proved the advantages of Feodosia as a location. The authorities revised the project, and colossal construction began in Feodosia.

In 1887-1888, Ivan Aivazovsky built a water supply system in the city:

To help those living on the outskirts of Feodosia, where water was extremely scarce, in 1887, the artist decided to donate to the town “50,000 buckets of clean water daily, without charge”. The water was to be drawn from his estate in Subash. To thank the painter for his generous gift, in 1890, grateful Feodosians erected a special fountain, entitled “To a Kind Genius”, on one of the town's boulevards. (Losev, 2017)

The fountain (Figure 17) with a written praise to Aivazovsky still remains in Feodosia, possibly as an archaic monument of a water body (springs of Subash) as private property that can be owned by a human and gifted.



Figure 17. Alexandr Utkin. (1945). *Fountain of I. Aivazovsky. 1888.* General view. Feodosia city municipality. Feodosia, Ukraine

Another industrialisation project executed with the help of Aivazovsky was a railway that would connect Feodosia with the centre of the Russian Empire. The appearance of a first-class commercial port in the city facilitated the construction of the branch from the Dzhankoy station. The artist dedicated a large painting to this event, *The First Train in Feodosia*, painted long before the official completion of construction work.



Figure 18. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1892). *The First Train in Feodosia*. Aivazovsky Gallery. Feodosia, Ukraine

Landscape, seen from the same point of view as the painting mentioned earlier, *Feodosia. Sunrise* (Figure 15) portrays the tower of Saint Konstantin blending into the background, when new elements of human-made nature are the primary focus - a train cutting through thick southern nocturnal air and vapour rising from engines of new at the time generation of ships heading to the freshly built port of Feodosia. Steam and smoke rise from locomotives and ships, blending with the natural clouds. The painting visualises a new stage in human-water relations: the coastline, once pictured in his *Feodosia. Sunrise*, as a romantic meeting point of sea

and sky, is now dominated by machines that cut through air and water. The sea becomes infrastructure, a route for commerce losing its agency. Aivazovsky aestheticizes ecological disruption, turning the merging of technology and environment into a sublime scene. The painting embodies the entanglement of local ecology, imperial industry, and acceleration of changes, where natural cycles and industrial time collide.

Approaching the end of the 19th century, Aivazovsky celebrated 50 years of artistic practice, and from the amplitude of the celebration, numerous documented greetings from all corners of the Russian Empire - it is possible to see the recognition and social status achieved through the depiction of bodies of water.

The documented greetings from St. Petersburg University, an academic centre of the Russian Empire, delivered by Rector M. Vladislavlev, once again highlighted the relationship of Aivazovsky and bodies of water. He stressed that art and science stem from the same intellectual pursuit: while science seeks truth through concepts, art conveys it through images. Aivazovsky's paintings were praised as embodying this unity, demonstrating a near-scientific knowledge of the sea yet rendering it with poetic intensity beyond the reach of natural science. His seascapes were framed not only as artistic triumphs but also as revelations of nature's truth, celebrated as both aesthetic achievements and contributions to Russia's intellectual life. (Sargasyan, 1967, pp. 223-224)

Contemporaries praised Aivazovsky as both an artist and an exceptional naturalist, or, in other words, a scientist who studies the environment. This observation is similar to the approach of ecocritical art history, which sees artistic work as a mode of obtaining environmental knowledge. Alan Braddock, for example, stresses that art and science share interpretive ground, each revealing ecological processes in different registers - the empirical and the aesthetic ones. (Braddock,

2009) Similarly, Andrew Patrizio describes the “ecological eye” as an attentiveness to non-human entities and their dynamics, where artists translate environmental knowledge into visual form (Patrizio, 2019). The claim that Aivazovsky knew the sea better than scientists, which was made by the director of the university, parallels ecocritical arguments about art’s ability to mediate between scientific observation and cultural imagination. Aivazovsky’s marines do not merely illustrate the sea but render its agency into visible reality. The storm and the calm, the details that an untrained eye would not recognise in motion, are now more visible in the painting. It is about the physics in the same way as about aesthetics. Works such as *Chaos (The Creation)*, inspired by biblical creation, staging the vitality of water and atmosphere, and *Azure Grotto, Naples*, Aivazovsky studied the physics of refracted light in seawater, offering a visual record of optical phenomena comparable to contemporary scientific accounts. These paintings do not merely illustrate the sea but render its agency visible, anticipating ecocritical calls to acknowledge the more-than-human as active participants in cultural history.

The Imperial Academy of Arts released a statement, estimating that after 50 years of practice, the number of works of Aivazovsky was approximately 4000. (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 156) By the time of his death in 1900, the number had grown to 6000, although it varies in different sources up to 10,000.

Aivazovsky remained loyal to the traditions of Romanticism in his painting throughout his entire career, despite its popularity gradually declining towards the end of the 19th century. As a possible reference to being an archaic figure himself, Aivazovsky in 1897 depicted *Ships at the Feodosia roadstead*. (Figure 19) and an old sailboat passing by all the modern ships - a parade honouring Aivazovsky on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

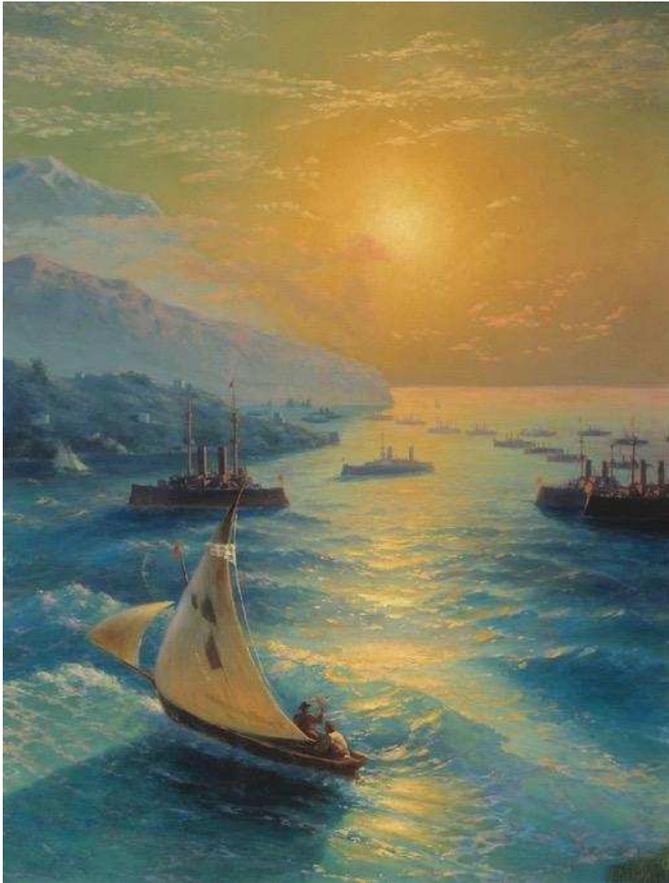


Figure 19. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1897) *Ships at the Feodosia roadstead*. Central Naval Museum. Saint Petersburg, Russia

The composition naturalizes maritime commerce by blending ships seamlessly into the coastal horizon, masking the ecological changes such as deforestation, tar production, and pollution tied to shipbuilding and port activity. Yet the dance of water and light still hints at the sea's agency, reminding viewers that the harbor's productivity depends on fragile environmental rhythms. The painting encodes a dual message: Feodosia as imperial gateway and the Black Sea as ecological collaborator, exploited and aestheticized simultaneously.

The last, unfinished work of Aivazovsky was the *Explosion of a ship* (Figure 20), where the explosion is the anthropogenic primary source of the light overpowering the moon, the depiction of the destructive entanglement of human technology and the marine environment. Unlike natural storms, the disaster here is

entirely artificial - an image of war, accident, or industrial violence. The sea absorbs the blast, carrying flames and wreckage across its surface. The Black Sea is portrayed as both witness and survivor. Overall, Ivan Aivazovsky's approach to depicting bodies of water throughout his artistic career solidifies the idea of cultural domination over them.

Practice of observation, 'meditation' with bodies of water, sense of belonging to the element, in life of Ivan Aivazovsky could be instead categorised as the mode of 'sadistic admiration' described by Morton in *Ecology without Nature* "Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration." (Morton 2009, p. 5)



Figure 20. Ivan Aivazovsky. (1900). *Explosion of a ship*. Aivazovsky Gallery. Feodosia, Ukraine

The sea, depicted on the unfinished *Explosion of a ship*, is a dark, shapeless abyss whose identity as a body of water can only be guessed by other elements of the painting, obediently reflecting the anthropogenic fire. It exists within a hierarchy where humans are above 'nature' and aligns with the political vector of the Russian Empire.

Taras Shevchenko and the ecological metaphor of growth

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) was a Ukrainian poet, author, artist, and influential public and political figure, as well as a folklorist and ethnographer. He was affiliated with the Imperial Academy of Arts and was a member of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius. His paintings and drawings, generally related to Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, comprise 835 works that have survived as original pieces or as prints or copies made during his lifetime, and 270 other works that are lost. The heritage of Shevchenko as a painter may not be as rich and monumental in comparison to artists such as Ivan Aivazovsky; however, considering all his artistic practices as a whole and their social impact may provide unique insights within ecocritical art history research.

From the early stages of his life, Taras Shevchenko did not share the prevailing idea in 19th-century European artistic circles that nature was an idyllic place. He was born in 1814 as a serf.¹⁶ Serfdom is inherently intertwined with the land, forming a unique enmeshment with the environment. Shevchenko, lately, recalled his childhood memories in a poem:

I don't know why they call
 A hut in a grove, a quiet paradise.
 I once suffered in the house,
 My tears were shed there
 ...
 I don't call it paradise,
 Those little huts in the grove
 Over a clean pond, the edge of the village. (Taras Shevchenko, 1850)

¹⁶ serfdom was a form of peasant servitude and dependence on the upper landowning classes that was characteristic of the feudal system and existed in different parts of Europe from the medieval period to the 19th century.

The village where Taras Shevchenko was born, Shevchenkove (formerly Kerelivka), is located on the watershed of the Vilshanka River, which flows into the Dniipro, and the Gnyly Tikich River, whose waters flow into the Southern Bug. The environment Shevchenko describes in the poem:

And the ravine, and the field, and the poplar,
And above the well, the willow
Bent down, like that longing.
A pond, a dam, and a windmill. (Taras Shevchenko, 1846)

Vegetation of the territory: among tree species, oak, ash, pine, hornbeam, alder, linden, maple, birch, and poplar prevail; among shrubs, hazel, viburnum, rosehip, blackthorn, and bird cherry are widespread; perennial grasses represent steppe vegetation. In river floodplains and wetlands, moisture-loving forbs, such as willow, prevail.

The Ukrainian forest-steppe lies within the European part of the forest-steppe natural zone. It stretches from the south-west border with Moldova to the south-east border with Russia through the central part of the region (33% of the country's territory). There is no strict line separating the natural zones, even if steppe plots wedge islands into the forest zone, and forests enter the steppe zone in adjacent masses.

A characteristic feature of the landscape is the high right banks of the rivers, strongly dissected by ravines, and the low left banks with terraces. The floodplains of the rivers and the low terraces are often swampy, and fields and settlements occupy the higher terraces. The forest-steppe zone has a dense network of waterways, including the Dniipro, Southern Bug, Dniester, and its tributaries. All rivers flow through valleys with asymmetrical banks and strong currents. (Bulava, 2008)

From childhood, Taras's unusual curiosity about the environment and attempts to broaden his horizons were evident. In the autobiographical story *The Princess*, the writer portrays himself as a peasant boy, who begins to think and ask: "What's over there over the mountain? There must be iron pillars supporting the sky! What if I went to see how they prop it up there? I'll go and see, because it's not far away." (Shevchenko, 1846) Notions in his biography pointed to the inclination towards artistic practices from a young age: "he ran into the weeds and drew." (Chaly, 1988, p. 52) Unlike for landscapists of a more privileged background, drawing from nature was not a mode of visual research or inspirational practice at that point. Taras Shevchenko had to hide his practice because it was perceived as an unacceptable leisure activity. The perception changed once he acquired a more professional level of skill - in 1829, young Shevchenko was included in the list of serfs suitable for relocation with the notion "suitable as a painter." (Chaly, 1988, p. 52)

The dedication to the visual arts played a crucial role for Shevchenko, as it ultimately led to his eventual freedom, and his journey towards it began with his departure from a village in Ukraine to Vilnius, where he studied art. It is uncertain who the teacher was in Vilnius. Some biographers have named Franz Lampi, who lived in Warsaw. A more certain guess is about Professor Jan Rustem (Rustemas, 1762-1835), an Armenian by origin. The basis for this are the words of Shevchenko in a letter: "... now I can only tell you what the old man Rustem, a professor of drawing at the Vilnius University, once told his students: "Draw for six years and paint for six months and you will become a master." And I find his advice very sound." (Abramovich, 1962, p. 110) This mention does not yet provide sufficient grounds to consider Rustem to be the teacher. He could have heard the expression given in the letter from one of the professor's students. On the building of Vilnius State University, the oldest university in our country, there is a memorial plaque with

inscriptions in Lithuanian, Russian, and Ukrainian: "In this building, in Rustem's workshop, the great Ukrainian revolutionary poet Taras Shevchenko studied." (Tkachenko, 1961, p. 16)

In 1831, Taras Shevchenko, a serf, transferred to Saint Petersburg, where he continued his studies in visual art. Unable to join the Imperial Academy of Arts, he was accepted as a student of Vasily Shiraev, an interior painter. In 1836, Taras Shevchenko met a Ukrainian painter, Ivan Soshenko. Acquaintance and friendship with Soshenko were of great importance in his further fate. It became the first step towards the turning point in his life - redemption from serfdom. Having witnessed Taras's artistic talent and irrepressible desire for painting, Soshenko was deeply sympathetic and compassionate towards him and tried to help him. He introduced Taras Shevchenko to the circle of his acquaintances, primarily comrades from the Imperial Academy of Arts.

In 1838, Taras Shevchenko was freed from serfdom with the help of prominent figures of the Russian Empire, including Zhukovsky, Bryullov, and Vielhorsky. A bright recollection of that moment brought to mind Shevchenko's later wonderful lines in the story *The Artist*, where he is referenced in a third person:

A quiet, smiling joy later replaced his first delights. All these days, although he had to work, the work did not come easily to him. And he would put his drawing in his briefcase, take his paper that declares freedom out of his pocket, read it syllable by syllable, kiss it, and cry. (p. 172)

Shevchenko, as a free individual, was allowed to attend the Imperial Academy of Arts under the supervision of Karl Brullov and mainly focused on portraits and figure drawings.

Kobzar, the first collection of poetry by Taras Shevchenko, was published in 1840 and included the following titles: "My Thoughts," "Perebendya," "Kateryna," "Poplar," "A Thought," "To Osnovyanenko," "Ivan Pidkova," and "Night of Taras."

Notions on the environment, particularly those characteristic of Ukrainian villages, are common to his drawings and poetry. The portrayal of trees is typical in Taras Shevchenko's iconography:

The wind howls through the oak grove,
 Walks across the field,
 The roadside bends the poplar
 To the very bottom.
 ...
 Grow, grow, poplar!
 Up and up,
 Grow flexible and tall,
 To the very cloud. (Taras Shevchenko, 1840)

At the beginning of the poem "Poplar," the act of bending of a tree was used as a symbol of Ukraine, struggling under the oppression of the Russian Empire. Moving forward with the narrative, Shevchenko calls for a tree to rise, implying that it is Ukraine that shall rise. It is a common approach for Environmental Humanities to deconstruct metaphors as such, calling them anthropocentric. "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are," Brendon Larson quotes Anaïs Nin in *Metaphors for Environmental Sustainability*. Although it is essential to discuss the erasure of the agency of non-human common for the 19th century and its romantic inclinations, a closer look at the case of Taras Shevchenko's art reveals different underlying motives. Publishing of manuscripts was heavily censored, and Shevchenko, due to his nationality, was receiving particular attention from censors:

Kobzar was composed and printed for approximately a month in the ‘privileged’ printing house of Fischer, one of the finest private printing houses of the time in St. Petersburg.

The official permission to release *Kobzar* from the printing house into the world was granted by Censor P. Korsakov on April 18, 1840. (Borodin, 1974, p. 4)

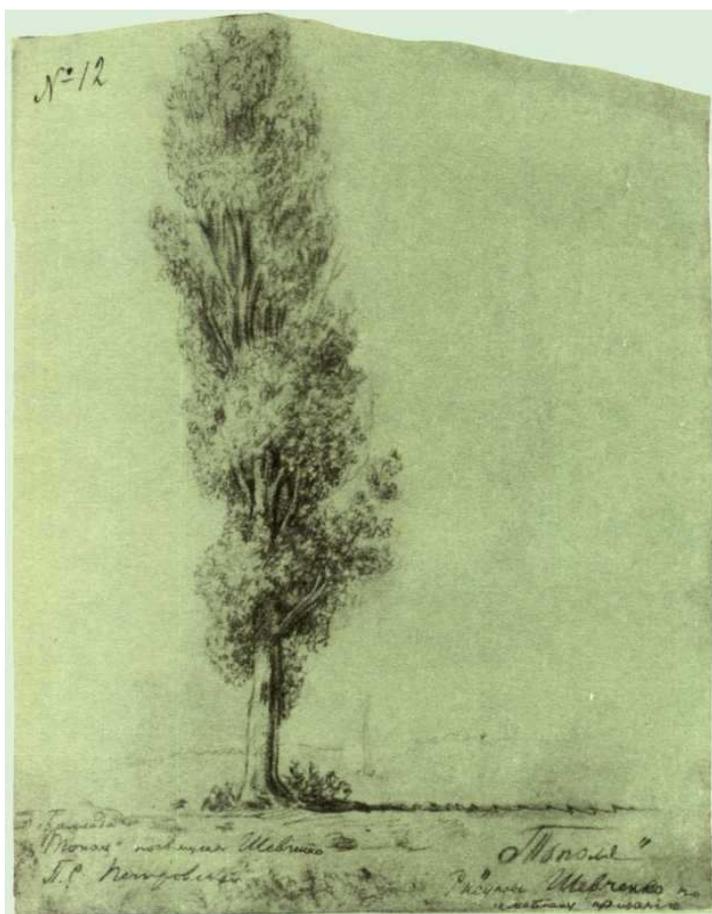


Figure 21. Taras Shevchenko. (1839). *A poplar*. Taras Shevchenko National Museum. Kyiv, Ukraine

The poem “Poplar” was illustrated by Taras Shevchenko (Figure 21). The illustration “*Poplar*” is an example of a common approach in the Taras Shevchenko style, where elements of the environment are depicted in a schematic rather than scientific manner. Although his primary focus in the visual arts always belonged to figure drawing, looking simultaneously at his depiction of trees and his poetry allows us to see a metaphor that goes beyond approaching a tree as an object - Taras

Shevchenko considers a tree to be a process of growth, transformation of matter, and a change, similar to notions on *meshwork* of Tim Ingold. In several essays, the British anthropologist Tim Ingold has proposed that we think of the world as a “meshwork,” an ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation over their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials over states of matter.

The symbolic system of Taras Shevchenko overlaps with traditional elements in Ukrainian folklore, with a rich representation of environmental elements as metaphors, where the artist’s inspiration can be traced. (Lewytska, 2006, p. 101)

The poem, published in *Kobzar*, "Katerina", describes the bright love of a peasant girl for a Muscovite officer who seduced her and abandoned her, leaving her pregnant. Following the poem, in 1842, Taras Shevchenko created one of his most recognised paintings (Figure 22).

In the work, emotionally colored non-human objects-symbols, such as broken stalks of grain and oak branches, empty spikelets, give the impression of wasted young life, mutilated by fate and doom. If with *A poplar* (both: the poem and the illustration) we see metaphorical resilience and promise of rising, the devastated non-human elements in the painting, *Kateryna*, are mirroring the emotional state and the destiny of the central figure.

The scene places the Ukrainian countryside as an active participant in the narrative: the endless plays contrast with Kateryna’s isolation, while the road and high horizon line evoke a sense of vulnerability. The bare field becomes an ecological metaphor of social processes - open, fertile, so easily exploited. As Alan Braddock (2009) notes, ecocritical art history studies environments as agents of meaning; here, the transformed by human steppe can show histories of domination and abandonment - cycles of agrarian life.



Figure 22. Taras Shevchenko. (1842). *Kateryna*. Taras Shevchenko National Museum. Kyiv, Ukraine

In Shevchenko's image, the environment is embodying what Lawrence Buell (2005) describes as the entanglement of social injustice and environmental setting. The result is a portrait not only of personal tragedy but of a colonized land, where both people and ecology are impacted by imperial exploitation.

Between 1843 and 1844, Taras Shevchenko spent nine months travelling around the territory of modern Ukraine, visiting, among other places, the village where he was born.

A new stage began in Shevchenko's visual art, characterised by a broad appeal to nature, encompassing landscapes, portraits, and genre scenes. The democratic artist took another significant step away from the Bryullov school,

moving towards a critical stance that denounced realism. The idea of *Picturesque Ukraine*, an album of pictures, finally matured. The central part of the sketches of the future etchings of the first edition was completed.

“The impressions from the nine-month stay in his native land were strong and unforgettable. The artist nourished them both in Moscow and in St. Petersburg.” (Borodin, 1984, p. 93)



Figure 23. Taras Shevchenko. (1843). *A house by the river*. Shevchenko Institute of Literature. Kharkiv, Ukraine

In landscapes, Taras Shevchenko (Figure 23) presents an unconventional political perspective on the nature-culture dichotomy. The abundance of ‘nature’ in Ukrainian villages creates a vast contrast with the extreme conditions of poverty and devastation associated with serfdom.

Progressively radicalising on his trips within the territory of modern Ukraine, Taras Shevchenko sees environmental agents as witnesses of social

injustice:

The judgment will come, and they will speak
 And the Dnipro and the mountains!
 And it will flow for centuries
 Blood into the blue sea
 (Taras Shevchenko, 1845, from “To dead, and to alive, and to unborn”)

To deepen his research on the history, folklore, and environment of Ukraine, Shevchenko became a member of the Archaeological-Geographical Commission from 1845 to 1847. His role consisted of depicting assigned sites. The artworks of Taras Shevchenko, particularly landscapes, could be categorised not by simply anthropocentric human presence within ‘nature’ but specifically by human presence represented with serfs and peasants, as exemplified by *Pochaiiv Laura from the south* (Figure 24).

In 1847, Taras Shevchenko was arrested as a member of the Cyril and Methodius Society. Its members, Ukrainian intellectuals based in Kyiv, had different ideological and political beliefs, but they were all united by opposition to the autocracy of the Russian Empire. Their ultimate goal was a society in which the rights of all classes would be equal. (Borodin, 1984, p. 185)

The verdict was passed with statements about Shevchenko as a poet rather than a painter; however, conditions of his exile included a strict prohibition of painting, which was later lifted, allowing his participation in the Archaeological-Geographical expeditions as a painter. (Lazarevsky, 1982, p. 198)

During the trial, the content of poems was named ‘outrageous’, particularly elements where he praises hetman’s rule - the period of Ukrainian autonomy under elected hetmans, slanders the Russian Empire, and ruminates about enslavement of Ukraine.



Figure 24. Taras Shevchenko. (1846). *Pochaiv Lavra from the south*. Taras Shevchenko National Museum. Kyiv, Ukraine

“His poems are doubly harmful and dangerous. In his outrageous spirit and insolence, going beyond all limits, he must be recognised as one of the most important criminals”. (Lazarevsky, 1982, p. 130)

Taras Shevchenko was sent into exile in 1847; he was forced to join expeditions. In 1848-1849, during an expedition to the Aral Sea under the leadership of the famous Russian navigator Captain-Lieutenant A. Butakov, the Aral sea was surveyed for the first time, its depths were measured, latitudes were determined, astronomical observations were made and a number of new islands were discovered; at this time, materials were collected about the life of the surrounding Kazakh

population, geological studies of the area were carried out and a rich description of the flora and fauna of the coast, as well as the islands of the Aral Sea, was made.

On assignment from Butakov, Taras Shevchenko created numerous sketches, drawings, and watercolours.

Chronologically, Shevchenko's drawings related to the expedition are divided into five groups:

1. Land crossing from the Orsk fortress to the Raim fortification;
2. First voyage on the Aral Sea;
3. Wintering on Kos-Aral;
4. Second voyage on the Aral Sea;
5. Stay in Orenburg.

The dates and individual titles of the works were established on the basis of expedition materials (A. Butakov's diaries and expedition maps). (Cassian, 1964, Vol. 8, pp. 3-4)

The botanical enmeshment could be found in the artworks from the expedition.

Shevchenko painted the dzhangis-agach¹⁷ tree (Figure 25), and wrote about it in the story titled *Twins*:

About two miles from the road, in a hollow, an old poplar tree was growing. We were crowded around it, looking with surprise and even (so it seemed to me) with reverence at the green guest of the desert. Around the tree and on its branches, devout Kirghiz hung pieces of multicoloured fabric, ribbons, strands of dyed horsehair, and the richest sacrifice - the skin of a wild cat, tightly tied to a branch.

He also gives a poetic description of this tree in the poem "God had an axe behind his door".

¹⁷ translates as "lonely tree"

The expedition member Makshev also spoke about this tree:

On May 26, a few miles before Kara-Butak, we saw a dzhangys-agach tree to the left of the transport road, and galloped towards it. This was the only tree on the entire route from Orsk to Raim, a black poplar, two fathoms thick at the root in girth and five fathoms high. There was a nest on it – a talgi, a bird of the eagle species. The Kirghiz considered this tree sacred and decorated it. (Makshev, 1896, p. 32)

The image foregrounds the tree as both an ecological survivor and a metaphor for human endurance under extreme conditions.



Figure 25. Taras Shevchenko. (1848). *Jangis-agach*. Taras Shevchenko Museum. Kharkiv, Ukraine

In *Trees in Literatures and the Arts*, a collection of ecocritical essays published in 2021, Annette Arlander, in the chapter “On the Individuality of Trees”, explores the symbolism of a lone tree: “The solitary tree has often been read as a marker of exile and marginality, a living emblem of both endurance and isolation.” (Concilio, Fargione, Arlander, & Alberto, 2021) An observation that aligns perfectly

with the circumstances in which Taras Shevchenko created his botanical illustrations.

The particular tree depicted - Jangis-agach - is more than just a metaphor of resilience and solitude. We can observe a site of co-existing of the native Kirghiz population and the more-than-human neighbour. Celebrating and decorating the tree is a way for humans to acknowledge the triumph of overcoming the hardship of living in a harsh environment.

In 1850, Shevchenko was transferred to continue his arrest in the Novopetrovsk fortification, located in the harshest natural corner of Central Asia, at the westernmost point of the Mangyshlak Peninsula on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. The views of Mangyshlak inspire Taras Shevchenko to create a series of landscapes, *Trees of Mangyshlak*, with the image of trees struggling to exist, growing with their last strength among the rocks, reaching for the life-giving soil (Figures 26, 27). The surface of the Mangyshlak Peninsula consists of limestone layers, covered with chalk hills of various shapes and almost devoid of vegetation. In some places on the peninsula, between the fragments of rocks and stones, there are groves of mulberry trees. Bronislav Zaleski (1819-1880), a comrade of Taras Shavchenko in the Novopetrovsk fortification, described the environment:

Not far from the Monk rock, a hundred mulberry trees, most of them of amazing shapes, grow in the cracks of a thick layer of limestone deposits. These trees are pretty large, their leaves are abundant; undoubtedly, under the rocks, which seem to hang over them, these trees reach the water with their roots; without such sources, how could they grow under the scorching sky of the desert, in a place utterly devoid of trees? (1865, p 47)

The solitude of individual trees portrayed by Shevchenko in *Trees of Mangyshlak* fortifies the visual metaphor of isolation. A drastically different system



Figure 26. Taras Shevchenko. (1851-1852). *Trees of Mangyshlak, 3*. Taras Shevchenko National Museum. Kyiv, Ukraine

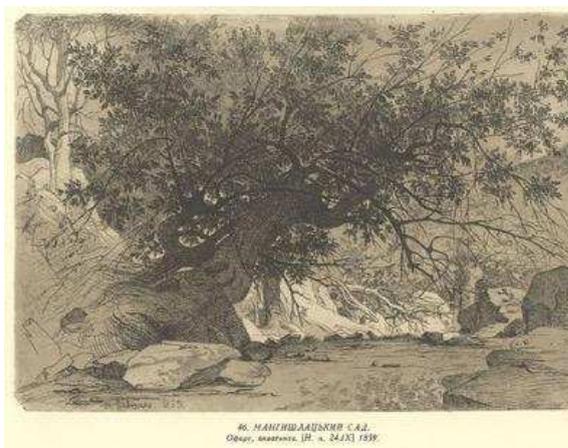


Figure 27. Taras Shevchenko. (1851-1852). *Trees of Mangyshlak, 9*. Taras Shevchenko National Museum. Kyiv, Ukraine

from the one he grew up in - forest-steppe ecosystem of Central Ukraine, and it's rich in humus soils characterised by dense vegetation cover and biodiversity. (Chibilyov, 2002, p 250) An “isolated” mulberry tree growing on rocks, perhaps due to unfamiliarity, becomes a ground for the projection of the poet and painter. Shevchenko, looking for familiar ecosystems, observes that usually a tree grows in formations with other plants, and the naked surface of rocks is a hostile environment, as trees of Mangyshlak exist in an unusual non-human pairing - a lonely tree which does not belong on bare rocks - the visual metaphor of the author's own non-belonging rises.

In 1857, the exile of Taras Shevchenko came to an end, and in 1859, he was able to return to Ukraine. Ukrainian poet Maksymovych wrote a poem full of botanical metaphors, dedicated to Shevchenko's newly obtained freedom, entitled "March 25, 1858":

Ukraine mourned,
 She remembered you all the time,
 Like a mother remembering her son.
 Your thoughts like mists
 Went up in the meadows,
 Your tears are like dew
 Fell on the steppes;
 Your songs are like nightingales
 Went chirping in the gardens.

The focus on trees will also appear in later drawings of Taras Shevchenko. After returning to Ukraine, he drew them - destroyed by the elements, broken. With expressive strokes, the artist recreates not only the form but also the soul of broken trees, embodying in them the similarity with the fates of Ukrainian people (Figure 28). The shift from the portrayal of isolated trees to groups tends to coincide with Shevchenko coming back to Ukraine, being among his people, with whom he shares destiny and struggles.

On July 13, 1859, Shevchenko was arrested again. This was the poet's third arrest. What were the reasons for it? Taras Shevchenko travelled to survey a plot of land that he was supposed to purchase. During the survey, an incident occurred that led to the arrest. (Cassian 1964, p. 440)

The gendarmes' special attention was drawn to Shevchenko's conversation with the peasant Sadovy:

Showing Sadovy a leaf torn right away from a linden tree, Shevchenko asked him in Malo Russian [Ukrainian language] - who gave it? And when Sadovy answered that it was God, Shevchenko replied: You are a fool, do you believe in God... Among the officials of the Mezhirich estate, rumours spread that Shevchenko, in addition to blasphemy, also told the aforementioned persons who were around him that they did not need a tsar, lords, or priests. (Lazarevsky, 1982, p. 325)



Figure 28. Taras Shevchenko. (1859). *The edge of the forest*. Taras Shevchenko National Museum. Kyiv, Ukraine

The arrest lasted for months, then Taras Shevchenko was released and returned first to Kyiv, later to Saint Petersburg. After his trip to Ukraine, the reputation of the ‘politically unreliable’ and ‘patented rebel’ Shevchenko was further strengthened.

It is characteristic that already in 1859, the Parisian magazine *Przegląd rzeczy polskich* mentioned:

Shevchenko also walked among people, befriended people... Obviously, he dreamed of the liberation of Ukraine and its original life and was wholly imbued with the idea of unconditional freedom and equality... (Franko, 1981, p. 222)

In the last years of his life, Taras Shevchenko lived in Saint Petersburg. Being profoundly sick, he still found inspiration in depicting ‘nature’. Ekateryna Junge¹⁸

¹⁸ Countess Ekaterina Fyodorovna Tolstaya, married name Junge was a Russian painter from the Tolstoy family.

(1843-1913), in her *Memories on Shevchenko*, noted that at the time, in any circumstances, Taras Shevchenko was still a deeply emotional person, extremely sensitive to everything beautiful:

No one was so sensitive to the beauty of nature as Shevchenko. Sometimes he would unexpectedly appear after dinner.

- My dear, take a pencil, let's go quickly!
- Where, may I ask?
- I have discovered a tree, and what a tree!
- Lord, where is this miracle?
- Not far, on Sredny Prospekt. Come on, let's go!

And we, standing, would sketch the tree on Sredny Prospekt in albums, and then we would walk, admire the sunset, and he preserved so much of the childishly fresh in his long-suffering soul. (Junge, 1883, p. 839)

Taras Shevchenko died in 1861 and was first buried in Saint Petersburg, then moved to a high mountain near Kanev, Ukraine, in the places that he once admired so much and where he dreamed of settling. Buried him in a place that remained lines from Shevchenko's poem "The Testament" - "among the wide steppe... so that the wide meadows, the Dnieper, and the cliffs could be seen...".

Taras Shevchenko's body of work, literary, visual, and political, offers a distinct and deeply embodied way of engaging with the environment that challenges dominant 19th-century European conceptions of nature as idyllic and separate from human life. As both a serf and an artist, Shevchenko approached the landscape not as an abstract or aestheticised space but as a lived, historical, and emotional terrain. His depictions of Ukrainian trees, rivers, and steppes are never just symbolic backdrops; instead, they act as witnesses to injustice.

Taras Shevchenko's work combines environmental elements with the realities of serfdom, colonialism, and exile through which he lived. His poplars and oaks are not simple anthropocentric metaphors for the Ukrainian people but witnesses of the past and co-authors of the future. His environmental practices were often forced, such as drawings produced in exile, but still the portrayed vision was accompanied by prose and poetry offering an ecological vision in which human and more-than-human lives are enmeshed in shared histories of oppression and endurance.

Through this lens, Shevchenko emerges as an essential figure in the ecocritical art history of Ukraine. The metaphor of growth in his poetry and drawings, a broken tree or a rising one, offers not only a symbol of Ukraine's national awakening or struggles, but also a broader environmental ethic grounded in persistence, transformation, and relationality.

Maximilian Voloshin and the Materiality of Rocks

Maximilian Voloshin (1877-1932), also known as Max Voloshin, was a notable Russian poet and an influential figure within the Symbolist movement in Russian literature and culture, a prominent figure in the visual arts.

He spent the early part of his childhood in Sevastopol and Taganrog. His education included time at the Polivanov Gymnasium as well as schooling in Crimea, where in 1893, his mother purchased an inexpensive parcel of land in Koktebel, a location that would later become central to his life and creative legacy.

Quara Dag and Minerals of Koktebel

“I worship you, oh crystals,
Starfish and flowers,
Plants, shells, rocks
(Petrified dreams of silently dreaming nature).

(Maximilian Voloshin, 1904)
.”

The Koktebel coast is bordered on one side by the volcanic massif of Mount Quara Dag¹⁹, saturated with dozens of minerals and rocks. Limestone masses approach Koktebel from the north. And from the east, the bay is bordered by Mount Toprakh-Kaya or Chameleon, composed of clay, sandstone, and limestone rocks. Quara Dag is the only extinct volcano in Europe from the Jurassic period of the Mesozoic era, 150-160 million years old. A more accurate definition of the current

¹⁹ Quara Dag is the closest transcription to Crimean Tatars' name of the site Qara dağ, qara “black” and dağ “mountain”. Another common transcription is Karadag

geological taxonomy of Quara Dag is dislocated tectonic fragments of an ancient Middle Jurassic paleovolcano. (Yudin, 2023, p. 100)

The volcanic formations of Quara Dag are very diverse. First of all, layered strata and intersecting bodies are distinguished. Layered strata consist of repeatedly layered lava flows and layers of volcanic tuffs and for this feature are called stratified (from the Latin word *stratum* - layer). Intersecting bodies tear the layered strata and, therefore, are younger than them.

Volcanic rocks of various appearances and mineral compositions were formed during the solidification of lava. They differ primarily in the content of silicon (Si), the amount of which is expressed in the form of silica (SiO₂). Quara Dag lavas and the volcanic rocks formed from them vary significantly in their silica content. (Yudin, 2023, pp 100-104)

The structure of Quara Dag includes about thirty sedimentary and volcanic rocks. The main stones that make up the massif are of volcanic origin: keratophyre, porphyrite, two-pyroxene andesite, glassy andesite, and basalt. Quara Dag has gained worldwide fame among geologists for its amygdule and vein minerals formed during low-temperature metamorphism of volcanic rocks, due to the impact of hot post-volcanic hydrothermal solutions on them. Milky-white and colourless quartz, various chalcedony, and opal are widespread. Quara Dag gemstones include pink and orange carnelians, bluish, grey, and smoky chalcedony, variegated ribbon and patterned agates, onyx, 'jasper', and variegated heliotrope, amethyst. As V. Suprychev established, 'jaspers' on Karadag were called varieties of chalcedony, very similar to jaspers, variously colored with impurities - jasperoids, or so-called 'chalcedonyolites' - chalcedony and quartz-chalcedony hydrothermal formations of basalt and andesite-basalt series. (Tishchenko, Kasatkin, & Shibaev, 2017, p. 77)

In general, considering all possible varieties, more than 100 minerals and coloured stones have been discovered on Quara Dag. Crimean gems have long attracted not only mineralogists but also enterprising jewellers. Koktebel's colored pebbles were used more than a hundred years ago at the Peterhof (Saint Petersburg, Russia) cutting factory, where they prepared material for mosaics.

Academician A. Fersman (1883-1945) was the first to find and describe several dozen minerals during his years of work in Crimea. This was a significant contribution to the collection of almost 200 minerals now known in Crimea. In his book *Memories of a Stone*, Fersman recalls visiting Crimea in 1915. At that time, a small workshop was huddled on the slope of Quara Dag. Its owner was engaged in the processing of coastal pebbles of chalcedony, agate, and carnelian. The products were sold to local residents and vacationers or sent to jewellers in other cities. In the following years, the business expanded significantly. (Fersman, 1956) At the end of 1940, production of jewellery from Crimean gems was established in Simferopol. Taking advantage of the connivance of local authorities, gems were mined barbarously, and explosions destroyed the rocky slopes of an extinct volcano.

The need to preserve this area was first scientifically substantiated in 1922 by academician A. Pavlov, who believed that the original forms of relief and landscapes of Quara Dag could compete with the famous Yellowstone National Park in the USA. (Starodubtseva & Soroka, 2017) At first, Quara Dag received the status of a natural monument of local significance, and then in 1963, of national importance. The preservation of Quara Dag was carried out with the aim of preserving the unique natural and mineralogical complex, strengthening the protection, and studying rare species of flora and fauna. In 1979, the Quara Dag Nature Reserve was established, which continues to function to this day.

Maximilian Voloshin calls Quara Dag and its surroundings, where he settled in 1907, the only 'real' Crimea, untouched by shallow romanticising:

The attitude of Russian artists to Crimea was the attitude of tourists visiting places famous for their picturesqueness. This tone was given by Pushkin, and after him, for a whole century, poets and painters saw in Crimea only:

A magical land - a joy for the eyes. (Voloshin, 2018, pp. 18-25)

Voloshin quotes famous lines from Pushkin's poem, blaming it on the proto-mass-tourism that was negatively impacting environments at the beginning of the 20th century. The artist seems to be grateful for the region where he is located - Cimmeria - being less picturesque and, therefore, less visited:

This scorched and uncomfortable land, eaten away by the alkali of all the cultures and races that have passed through it, full of nameless stones of buried foundations, found the strength to flourish in Russian art as an independent school of landscape ... The lithology of Crimean landscapes is endless. ... In today's Russian Crimea, nothing remains from the previous cultures except the landscape, but in it, you can read its entire past. (Voloshin, 2018, pp. 18-25)

In 1903-1913, Maximilian Voloshin, together with his mother, built a house in Koktebel that became a place of pilgrimage for poets, writers, and cultural figures. Currently, the house exists as a museum. The area now is strongly associated with the poet. The grave of Maximilian Voloshin on Mount Kuchuk-Yenishary is a part of the Historical and Cultural Memorial Museum-Nature Reserve "Cimmeria of M. Voloshin". The reserve was created in 1960 and expanded in 2000 and includes five museums with a total museum fund of more than 90 thousand storage units, graves and tombstones in the Koktebel and Stary Krymsk cemeteries, a memorial sign on the site of the ruined crypt of the Junge family - the founders of the Koktebel village.

The concept of the reserve's development is based on the ecological-historical-cultural principle, which posits the existence of nature, history, and culture in the south-eastern Crimea as a unified system. The geological past of Cimmeria, marked by the traces of cultures from bygone peoples, is today confirmed by the unity of the historical landscape and its artistic embodiment in the works of various artists, writers, and musicians across different generations.

The creation of the reserve was a specific manifestation of the socio-cultural aspect of ecology, aimed at preserving and protecting the cultural and historical space, known as Cimmeria, named after Maximilian Voloshin's interpretation of Homer.

Voloshin, the house of poets, and the Stones of Qara Dag

Over there, behind the profile of the coastal cliffs,
A certain likeness of me is captured
(My forehead, my nose, my neck, and my eyebrows)

(Voloshin, *The house of the poet*, 1926)

Koktebel is a small village located at the northeastern foot of the Quara Dag mountain formation. Mountain ledges, visible from the seashore, are unofficially called 'The profile of Voloshin.' Maximilian himself first noted the anthropomorphic resemblance.

The profile is visible from the grave of the artist situated, according to his will, on top of a hill. The fame of the staple figure in the region attracts tourists who have a tradition of participating in a sort of living sculpture formation by bringing numerous pebbles and placing them next to the tombstone.

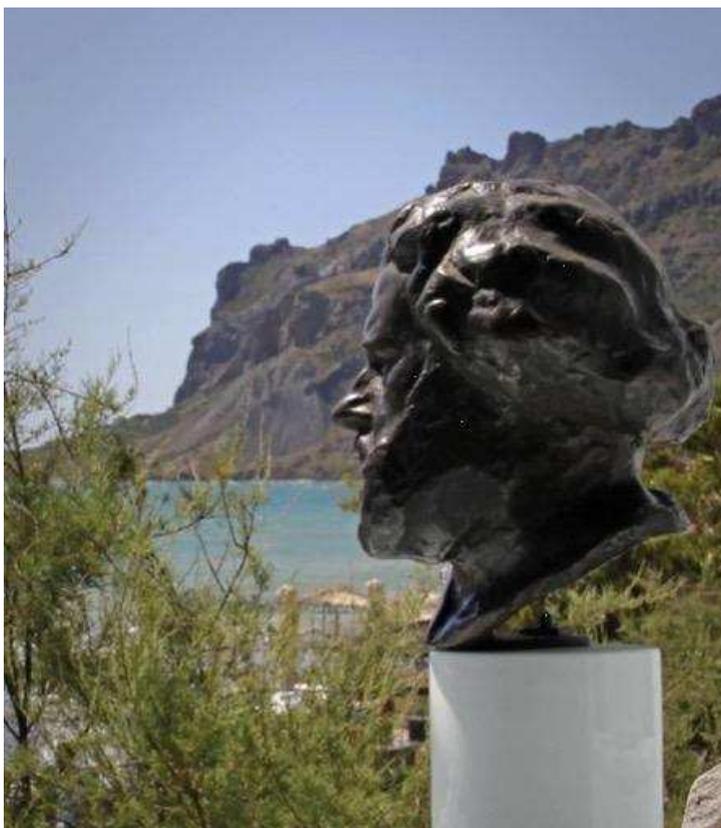


Figure 29. Sculpture: A. Matveyev. (1928). *Portrait of M. Voloshin*. Museum of Maximilian Voloshin. Koktebel, Ukraine
Photo: A. Pristinsky. (2018)

Across the Quara Dag massif, located "Voloshin's Trail", one of the 52 stages of the linear route "Great Crimean Trail", which runs along the Black Sea coast, connecting western and eastern Crimea.

Naming a path for a walk after Voloshin was not random - notices on the artist's promenades around Koktebel and their place in artistic practices could be found in his writings as well as those of contemporaries:

I paint watercolours regularly, two or three every morning, so that they form a kind of artistic diary where all the themes of my solitary walks are recorded and woven together. (Voloshin 1976, p. 45)

He writes to Obolenskaia:²⁰

²⁰ Painter and graphic artist Yulia Obolenskaya (1889 - 1945), an original representative of the Silver Age

Imagine that you are walking from early morning until late at night along the paths, immersed in your thoughts and contemplation, and sometimes a verse or stanza appears in you: it does not quite correspond to what you are looking at, but it relates to the general mood of the landscape... Their combination is not parallel, but irrational ... It seems to me that this is one of the possibilities of combining a word with a picture. I am very against parallelism in art. We must look for a symphonic, not unison, combination. (Voloshin 2017, Letter to Obolenskaia).



Figure 30. Maximilian Voloshin. (1932) *Koktebel*. Chuvash State Art Museum, Cheboksary, Russia

As well as Aivazovsky, Voloshin intentionally did not paint from nature, but rather practised attentive observations for further development of artworks in a studio:

Creative work is the ability to govern your unconscious. Observation, documentation, and naturalism are the foundations of all art. A document should not only be found and experienced, but it should also be forgotten. In

other words, it should become part of an artist to a degree when it is a part of his unconscious, because oblivion is not a loss, but a final assimilation. (Voloshin, 2007, p. 22)

Those 'meditations on' his surroundings had exceptional results. Emil Mindlin (1900-1981), a Russian Soviet writer, dedicated a chapter to the interactions he had with Voloshin in his book *Extraordinary Interlocutors*, covering the period from 1920 to 1922. Although most of them were about the poetic circle in which both Voloshin and Mindlin participated, there is an excellent notion of Voloshin's practices as a painter and naturalist:

A geological party was working in the Koktebel area. The geologists met Voloshin and began to visit him. Having seen his Koktebel landscapes, poems of stones, cliffs, ravines, and soil erosions painted with his brush, the geologists exchanged joyful glances. They found that Voloshin's conventional watercolour landscape gave a more accurate and truthful idea of the character of the geological structure of the area than a photograph!

The geologists, according to Mindlin, commissioned a whole series of watercolours from Voloshin. They noted how the artist's works did not depict any particular site of the area, but rather conveyed the general character of the landscape, the structure of the soil with precision. Voloshin spoke proudly about the geologists' commission. In their scientific interest in his watercolours, he saw confirmation of his long-standing faith in art as the most accurate and true measure of things. (Mindlin 1979, p 28)

Voloshin's affair with stones, from mentioning the word in his poetry 67 times (Zlydneva, 2016, p. 140), making painting pigments from it (Markina, 2019), using it as canvas (Miroshnichenko & Palash, 2017, p. 25), was an enmeshment similar to one described within the concept of new materialism. Slopes of ancient,

150 million years old, Middle Jurassic paleo volcano Quara Dag became a perfect ground for the development of different modes to approach the agency of stones within Geophilic Long Ecology, the way Jeffrey Cohen sees it in *Stone: an Ecology of the Inhuman*:

Ecology becomes Long Ecology, an effectively fraught web of relations that unfolds within an extensive spatial and temporal range, demanding an ethics of relation and scale. A geophilic Long Ecology exchanges human life spans as familiar units of counting for more profound durations, millennia, and epochs. (2010, p. 41)

The paleo volcano Quara Dag is not only an embodiment of the ecological time scale, but also, when encountering humans, proposes a different size scale from monumental masses of rocks to small colourful pebbles. It allows us to observe a certain immortality of lithic - small parts that were once part of the volcano due to actions of weathering agents²¹ gained a new identity, new potential, rather than stopped existing.

In *Stone: an Ecology of the Inhuman*, Jeffrey Cohen states: “A stone-oriented ontology would grant the lithic its indivisibility, autonomy, distinctiveness, and individuality. A stone will always evade full scrutiny, will always hold in its depths an illimitable potency.” (2010, p. 44)

It is possible to state that with pebbles of Koktebel, the colour, coming from chemical composition, was an inspiration behind the human-lithic encounter. The very encounter Voloshin named ‘stone rush’:

Max [Voloshin], laughing, told us: "Well, I'm so glad! It's so good that you came! Rest. Now you'll get 'sleeping' sickness, and then 'stone rush', but it's okay, it'll pass.

²¹ natural processes and forces that break down rocks and other materials at the Earth's surface. These agents include water, ice, acids, salts, plants, animals, temperature changes, and wind.

...

And indeed, after the bustle of Moscow or St. Petersburg, it was nice to go wild on the seashore suddenly and, with childish excitement, search for beautiful gems among the shiny pebbles! Greenish plasma and prase, pink and yellow carnelian, and red and green jasper were often found. Competition inevitably arose - who would collect the best collection? They organised stone exhibitions and competitions. (Chukovsky, 1979)

The younger sister of a famous Russian poetess, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anastasia, wrote in her memoir, recalling their stay at Voloshin's house: "the house of Voloshin and his mother, whom everyone called Pra (short for Pra-Mother), was filled with books, paintings, sketches, dried plants in clay vases." She recalls seeing on the shelves and tables boxes with Koktebel stones in them - agates, carnelians, chalcedonies. Pra, Voloshin's mother, made all sorts of patterns on plates from stones in scatterings. "Everyone here suffers from this disease: they look for the stones on the shore, find them, collect them... Marina is crazy about them." (Tsvetaeva, 2022)

One guest of Voloshin's house stood out in his approach to the stones; it was Osip Mandelstam who claimed that an encounter with simple, grey stones unwanted by others helped him to understand the *Divine Comedy* by Dante:

Osip Mandelstam visited Crimea several times. He, along with all of Voloshin's guests, wandered along the shore, looking at their feet. However, he did not collect precious carnelians, not transparent chalcedony, but some special stones, not at all beautiful. "Throw them away," his wife said. "Why do you need such stones?" Mandelstam was silent.

One of the evenings, while staying at Voloshin's house, Mandelstam began to write the essay *A Conversation about Dante*. In the process of work, he stated that he understood the structure of *The Divine Comedy* while talking to ugly stones. "And

you said to throw them away," the poet reproached his wife. "Now do you understand why I need them?" (Mets, 2019)

Mandelstam, who fell into disgrace with the USSR government and was sent into exile, recalls the memory of stones later in 1935:

I will perform a smoky rite:
 In disgrace before me lie
 Strawberries of another summer -
 Double-sincere carnelians
 And the ant's brother - agate.
 But to me, the simple soldier
 Of the sea depths, grey, wild,
 Whom no one is glad to see. (Mandelstam, 1935)

The colour of stones as a distinctive feature lies behind a human inspiration to explore more of its origin, to establish a deeper understanding of lithic. J. J. Cohen's *Prismatic Ecology* attempts to understand ecological thought through the prism of colours and argues for the contribution on the technical end. He captures the fundamental move, implicit even in technical art history, that art pigments make from 'environmental compounds' to 'cultural actants'. As such, colour becomes 'a thing made of other things through which worlds arrive.' (2013, p 180)

Maximilian Voloshin speaks on his practice of embodiment of more-than-human through, along with other things, observing colour:

To see everything, to understand everything, to know everything,
 to experience everything,
 To absorb all forms, all colours with the eyes.
 To walk across the whole earth with burning feet,
 To perceive everything and to embody it again.
 Maximilian Voloshin. 1904

In the poetic system of Voloshin, we can often encounter mineralogical adjectives of colour designation, which are used as epithets to describe the environment of Quara Dag and are: turquoise sky, crystal water, emerald forest, ruby winds, amber light (Taran, 2012, pp. 88-91)

If the exploration of a stone through colour is more characteristic of the heritage of Voloshin as a poet, for his painting, the dominant modes of relating to lithic are visual replication - a landscape that not only pictures stones but resembles them with its composition, and interpretation.

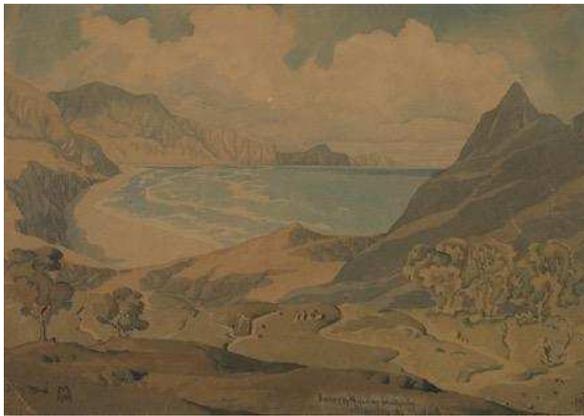


Figure 31. Maximilian Voloshin. (1928) *The shore of Koktebel*. Museum of Maximilian Voloshin. Koktebel, Ukraine



Figure 32. Kaushik Patowary. (2015). *Picture Agat*. Amusing Planet

Voloshin's landscapes resemble stones, specifically the so-called Landscape Stones, which are slices of colored minerals whose varied layers form patterns that evoke imagery in the viewer. These patterns often suggest landscapes, but they can also resemble portraits, cityscapes, or architectural forms. Interpreting such stones involves identifying meaningful images within the naturally occurring shapes of the mineral. Viewers often perceive organic forms - plants, animals, or human figures, giving the impression that the stone is alive. Jasper and agate are the most common

minerals found in these types of rocks, with agate frequently appearing in Voloshin's 'stone' poetry. (Figures 31, 32)

The interpretation of a stone's form involves looking at its prominent features and continuing them. A notable example of the approach is *Landscape reproducing the pattern of stone* (Figure 33) - a painting made for one of the guests of the house of Voloshin, Ivan Sarkizov-Serazini, *the landscape from a stone he found* (as written on the picture in Russian). We can see a seascape: waves, foam formed by rocks in the middle of the picture, difference in depth accentuated with darker colour - all of it Maximilian Voloshin saw in a single pebble brought from a shore. An environment capturing itself.

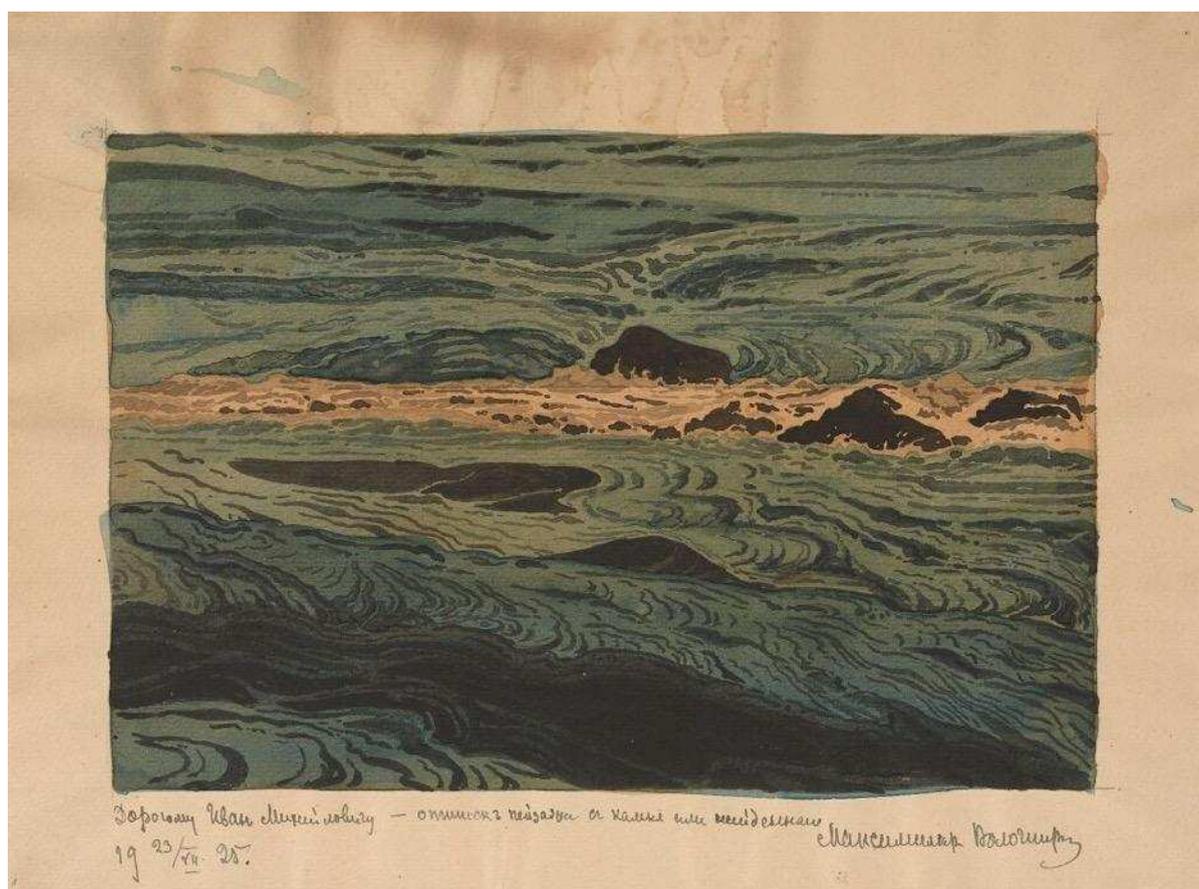


Figure 33. Maximilian Voloshin. (1925). *Landscape reproducing the pattern of stone*. Tretyakov Art Gallery. Moscow, Russia.

Another example of the interpretation of stone's form, which goes beyond the thick watercolour paper mentioned in the memoirs of Maria Voloshina, the spouse of Maximilian. In *Max in Things*, she recalls the study on the desk of her husband - flat stones, polished by the sea and painted over (Figure 34):

On each of them, Max painted an image of the Mother of God. Max often painted such images. Once, Max went for a walk and thought to find something and give it to me. And he found a flat stone with a drawing drawn by nature itself, strongly reminiscent of the head of the Mother of God. Max liked this stone; he gave it to me, and he began to try to paint the same images of the Mother of God, in the same bluish-golden tones, with barely outlined lines, forcing you to peer, look for Her face, and revive with your imagination what is hinted at in the contours and colors. (Miroshnichenko & Palash, 2017, p. 25)



Figure 34. Maximilian Voloshin. No date. *The Virgin and Child, Series*. Museum of M. Voloshin. Koktebel, Ukraine

Voloshin turns stones shaped by the sea into quasi objects that are composites of lithic and nonlithic elements. He places material as a co-creator in the art process, not, however, an equal:

Painter, sculptor, architect - you are not a creator; you are only the educator of the substance; you teach balance, the human structure, and civic consciousness to stone and metal, color and line, you teach them desires, you

initiate them into the mysteries of passion and poison the silence of their consciousness with the poison of feelings and suffering. (Voloshin 2007, 300).

About the visualisation of stone and the visualisation with stone talks Zlydneva in *'Living Stone' in poetry and paintings of Maximilian Voloshin*:

In his diary from 1909 (January 2, Paris), he [Voloshin] wrote: "Our path lies through matter and through its forms. Those who call to the spirit, call back, not forward." The substance of stone, its visualisation called Voloshin To liberation from figurativeness. The destruction of the boundary between nature and culture led to the animation of the inorganic and the mineralisation of the anthropomorphic. (2016, p. 149)

Another lithic presence in the art practice of Voloshin was drawing pigments as 'cultural actants' of 'environmental compounds' (terms mentioned previously from J. Cohen's *Prismatic Ecology*) - usage of pigment from minerals and soil, sourced by Voloshin, was discovered during restoration works on his painting. Restorators from the Grabar Art Scientific Restoration Centre worked for two years to restore 22 watercolours that were kept in the storerooms of the Museum of Maximilian Voloshin and were never shown to the public; these were mainly sheets from the 1920s with views of Crimea. Olga Temerina, a top-category graphic restorer, noted:

This is not the first time we have encountered Voloshin's watercolours. Both we and our colleagues in other museums know that the pigments he used in his works behave bizarrely. Even with the most delicate treatment, they can change colour; they are unstable to any impact. That is why, before starting work, we conducted several studies.

When studying it under a microscope, scientists saw mineral particles, and their appearance was completely different from what industrial watercolours look like.

Memories and letters confirmed the guesses: Voloshin made many pigments himself from minerals. X-ray fluorescence analysis allowed us to determine the chemical composition of the pigments. These are various ochres and earths that artists have been using for a very long time. The land of ancient Cimmeria not only entered into Voloshin's poems and became the main subject of his watercolours, but it is also physically present in his paintings. (Markina, 2019)

At the *Exhibition of Watercolours by M. Voloshin, after restoration* in the Grabar Art Conservation Centre, paintings of Maximilian Voloshin were presented alongside samples of minerals similar to those used as the pigments (Figure 35).



Figure 35. Grabar Art Conservation Centre. (2019). *Exhibition of Watercolours by M. Voloshin after restoration*. Moscow, Russia

The paintings made of locally sourced minerals are examples of the Prismatic Ecology concept of “a thing made of other things through which worlds arrive.”

A simultaneous look at Voloshin’s legacy as a writer and as a painter allows us to see another, less direct, lithic representation.

In the approach similar to this of Long Ecology: in *Apollo and the Mouse* (an essay), Voloshin compares the time between the mountain and the mouse to the crack between the past and the present:

Time is eternity, a tense and ever-moving sphere of inner intuitive feelings, which to our logical consciousness seems to be a vast mountain of darkness

and chaos, shaken to the ground. And from the crack, an infinitely small moment is born - a mouse. A mountain gives birth to a mouse, just as eternity gives birth to a moment. Every moment is an elusive rift between the past and the future. Every moment rings in a crystal Apollonian dream, like a crack in a crystal vessel. (Leonenko, 2021, pp. 23-24)



Figure 36. Maximilian Voloshin. (1927) *The surf of the hills and the waterfalls of the mountains*. Museum of M. Voloshin. Koktebel, Ukraine

Depiction of a crack in a matter is a common motif in artworks of Maximilian Voloshin (Figure 36). In *Maximilian Voloshin Between Spirit and Matter*, Elena Leonenko argues that it is a visual continuation of the metaphor of time in *Apollo and the Mouse*:

A pristine landscape, with very few details; however, dark or light lines representing rock strata and rifts are typically present. The mountain, therefore, is the embodiment of time, and the crack is the present moment. (2021, pp. 23-24)

The idea of his writings complementing his artworks was expressed by Voloshin in correspondence:

Letter to Obolenskaia:

Imagine that you are walking from early morning until late at night along the paths, immersed in your thoughts and contemplation, and sometimes a verse or stanza appears in you: it does not quite correspond to what you are looking at, but it relates to the general mood of the landscape... Their combination is not parallel, but irrational ... It seems to me that this is one of the possibilities of combining a word with a picture. I am very against parallelism in art ... We must look for a symphonic, not unison combination (Voloshin, 2017)

In *Stone: An ecology of the inhuman*, Jeffrey Cohen states: “To touch stone is to encounter alien duration.” (Cohen, 2015, p. 80) Throughout the book, he examines the alliances through which Stone’s extended temporality is enmeshed with a human story. The symphony of words and pictures of Maximilian Voloshin is an example of exploration of the temporal scale of human-lithic examples.

The artistic and philosophical engagement of Maximilian Voloshin with the geological and mineral landscape of Koktebel, Crimea—particularly the Quara Dag massif is an example of an early ecologically conscious mode of art-making. Voloshin’s artistic practice cultivates what can be understood as a ‘geophilic’ aesthetic, grounded in the intimate, reverent, and transformative relationship between the human and the lithic.

Voloshin's deep fascination with the Quara Dag, a dislocated Middle Jurassic paleo-volcano, provided him not only with thematic material but also with physical substance for his work.

Voloshin's writing is steeped in mineralogical language, and he repeatedly personifies stones as sentient, expressive agents. This lithic intimacy extended to his visual art, where he used pigments ground from local minerals, creating paintings that are materially and symbolically inseparable from the land.

Voloshin critiqued the romanticised, touristic gaze often cast upon Crimea, emphasising instead a raw, eroded, yet profoundly vital terrain. His artistic output becomes a kind of 'stone writing,' where geologic forms and processes are not metaphors but collaborators.

The house that Voloshin built in Koktebel, which became a hub for intellectuals, writers, and exiles, served as a laboratory for these geopoetic experiments. Accounts from guests, such as Kornei Chukovsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Osip Mandelstam, reveal how the shared practice of collecting and interpreting stones became a ritual of encounter and reflection. Mandelstam, notably, attributed his understanding of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to his meditations on unassuming grey stones, rejecting the gem-like in favour of the humble and opaque.

Voloshin's watercolours and stone-paintings reflect a mode of seeing and representing that is both mimetic and interpretive. His images do not aim for photographic accuracy; instead, they offer a "conventionally generalised landscape brought to the utmost poetic expressiveness." This aesthetic, noted by visiting geologists, surprisingly captured the geological structure of the terrain better than photographs. Through such examples, the thesis argues that Voloshin's practice

embodies what Jeffrey J. Cohen calls “long ecology”—a relational ethics attentive to deep time and the material vitality of stone.

The thesis also explores how Voloshin’s art enacts the symbiosis of matter and meaning. His stone paintings—some directly on pebbles found on Koktebel shores—demonstrate a quasi-animistic approach where the material properties of the object determine the form and tone of representation. Drawing from new materialist thought, especially the work of Cohen and Jane Bennett, the thesis positions Voloshin’s work as an early articulation of an ecological ontology that destabilises binaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object, art and environment.

The final chapters examine how colour, derived directly from minerals of Quara Dag, functions in Voloshin’s art as an epistemological tool. Colour is not merely symbolic; it becomes a material trace of geological history, embodying what Cohen’s *Prismatic Ecology* terms ‘environmental compounds’ turned into ‘cultural actants.’ Voloshin’s artworks thus transform minerals into agents of meaning, allowing landscapes to ‘speak’ in hues.

Voloshin’s poetic, painterly, and philosophical engagements with the stones of Koktebel constitute a form of ecological consciousness. His work invites us to reconsider the agency of stone, the poetics of materiality, and the possibility of an art grounded not only in representation but in participation with the more-than-human world. It demonstrates how the mineral landscape of Crimea was not simply a background for Voloshin’s life and art, but an active and enduring collaborator in his creative and ethical vision.

Conclusions

The study on the practice of depicting landscape and the ecological consciousness within Ukrainian artists of the 19th - early 20th century allowed us to observe that ecological attention, or sensibility, is required to produce artworks, at least within the genre of landscape. It is possible to conclude that art created by Ivan Aivazovsky, Taras Shevchenko, and Maximilian Voloshin is not merely an aesthetic product, but an outcome of a complex process in which non-human entities play a significant role.

Starting with the most recognized artist out of three - Ivan Aivazovsky, the first look at his biography allows us to see that close ecological attention to bodies of water, which helped him to execute the famously realistic marines, started from childhood on the shore of Black Sea. However, that observation, that his residence in a coastal area had an influence on his art, would not be a new one. The study instead allows us to change the word "influence" to "entanglement," as we witnessed a more complex process, where Aivazovsky initiated multiple industrial projects that influenced bodies of water.

Now, more than a century later, while the negative consequences of industrialization are evident, it is easy to see only its devastating impact on the environment. However, as we observe how the art of Aivazovsky encodes ecological change, registering the impact of industrialization in a celebratory key, it is essential to remember that at the end of the 19th century, the changes were instead associated with progress, the rise of the economy, and, consequently, the level of life of inhabitants of the area. The Black Sea became an infrastructure for empire and commerce, and Aivazovsky depicts how rays of light penetrate fumes and steam above the bodies of water in the same way he used to portray natural clouds. Timothy

Morton (2007) would call the phenomena “aesthetic filtration,” where ecological disruption is rendered in an aesthetically pleasing way. The way industrial elements smoothly blend into ecosystems on the depicted landscapes creates an illusion of belonging of those elements within the environment.

Perhaps contemporaries of Aivazovsky would not see in a picture the anthropocentric act of diminishing bodies of water to a platform for trade and military expansion of the Russian Empire; they would see improvements - the port full of life, the train carrying innovation and prosperity. The message that perfectly aligns with the politics of the Russian Empire of the time. The entire career of Aivazovsky was greatly supported by the imperial court, starting with the first commission of painting of the scenes of the naval exercises at Kronstadt by Tsar Nicholas, which was made when Aivazovsky was 19 years old. (Sargasyan, 1967, p. 13) The success of Aivazovsky could be seen as a final stage of the politics of the Russian Empire that started during the reign of Peter the Great (1697-1698), who, as part of Westernization reforms, brought foreign masters of marine and landscape genre to create art that serves a propagandistic function, glorifying the establishment of Russian naval power. (Oleinik, 2022, pp. 352-353) After a long history of circulation through commissions and Academy training with Western tutors, Aivazovsky was the artist who created a distinguished visual language that belonged only to the Russian Empire.

Artworks of Ivan Aivazovsky embody some contradictions - they register vitality and agency of bodies of water and, at the same time, glorify ecological violence towards them. Both the artist’s testimonies and the strikingly accurate depiction of bodies of water signal that Aivazovsky has ecological sensibility; he is attuned to bodies of water, and he carefully observes them throughout his entire life.

However, with a clear hierarchy of humans above non-humans, Aivazovsky's way of relating to bodies of water is the approach that Blue Humanities asks us to re-imagine. He is the kind of artist from whom we have to reclaim visually in order to co-exist in harmony with bodies of water.

Moving to the case of Taras Shevchenko, we are ending up on another side of colonial domination with radically different symbolism. We see an extreme poverty and struggles of serfdom, within which Shevchenko's arboreal metaphors - poplars, oaks, and mulberries become ecological witnesses of injustice. While applying humanistic morals, as we see how Shevchenko's approach could be perceived as morally good, with empathy for his personal struggles and the hardships of the population he represented. However, his portrayal of non-human entities lacks its own agenda and is presented instead as an anthropocentric metaphor. At least he dismantles the idyllic vision of 'nature' that was dominant in nineteenth-century art; his environment is lived in, mistreated, and entangled with violence and resilience.

In some ways, Shevchenko anticipates modern Environmental Humanities by refusing to separate human and non-human in his call for social justice. In a given political circumstance, even naming elements of the Ukrainian environment - as, for example, the terves of the Dnipro river with a view of which he wants to be buried - led to acknowledgment of the terves as a valuable element of Ukrainian ecological identity. As a matter of fact, the terves next to Shevchenko's grave currently remain part of a protected area that was not impacted by the building of a series of hydrological dams that re-shaped the pool of the Dnipro river in the middle of the 20th century.

Taras Shevchenko addressed the degradation of land, vegetation, and people under imperial domination. The violence is slow, and elements start to blend, regaining wholeness. The way he depicts *a house by the river* (1843) that falls apart is the complete opposite of *The First Train in Feodosia* (1892) by Aivazovsky - the lack of industrialization comes not from principles of harmonious co-existing with non-human, but rather from neglect of the less desirable than Crimean land of Ukraine. Perhaps, given a chance, Shevchenko would also glorify ecological disruption. Yes, his elements of the environment are witnesses of social injustice, but is there an actual non-human struggle? We see a broken branch or a completely dismantled tree, but all of it happens also without human impact, naturally. We are rather observing a trick that is typical for the human mind - anthropomorphisation of non-human. However, the environment portrayed by Shevchenko, even with stated inconveniences, is still an active participant in historical memory and a valuable element of Ukrainian national identity.

When it comes to Maximilian Voloshin and his lifelong dialogue with lithic elements of the environment, we can see a mode of ecological sensibility that could be named as proto-new materialism. Not without elements of anthropomorphisation or metaphors, Voloshin builds his artistic practice drawing on stones, with stones, portraits of stones, re-imagining stones - the list goes on. The artist sees the coastal area he inhabits as a lithic archive. His practice resonates with Cohen's notion of "long ecology," acknowledging the temporality of human presence.

It is almost ironic how, in a traditional sense, the least alive out of three non-human elements of the environment, a stone was given more agency and vitality than water and trees. Voloshin embraces raw landscape and its elements, acknowledging stones as dynamic collaborators. However, if his approach needs a

critique, it would be about the fact that the author distances himself from lived ecological realities and sometimes veers into esotericism. In comparison to works of Aivazovsky and Shevchenko, Voloshin's artworks lack observation detail; thus, environmental sensibility is not as evident from solely observing his watercolors. However, after a closer look at biographical sources, we see testimonies on Voloshin's close relationship with surroundings - long daily walks, 'meditations on', and sustainable extraction of resources for art materials. It is possible to conclude that his ecological sensibility and mode of relation to a non-human are less manifest in landscape paintings.

Among the three artists chosen for case studies, it is possible to trace certain similarities:

Adaptation of European artistic traditions - Avazovsky was influenced by Dutch and Italian marines, Voloshin with Symbolism and French influences, and Shevchenko with academic drawing, with each artist reworking those models into a local context.

Elements of the environment were treated by none of them as a simple passive backdrop, although some were giving non-humans more agency than others; we encounter in each case modes of co-creation and close ecological attention.

Each artist practiced within a framework that has similarities with concepts that would be coined a century later within the discipline of Environmental Humanities. For Aivazovsky, it is Blue Humanities with a focus on bodies of water as a medium of power and vulnerability. For Shevchenko, it is a concept of slow violence that impacts the Ukrainian nation as a marginalised community within the Russian Empire and its environment in a gradual yet devastating manner. For

Voloshin, it is geopoetics as a combination of geography, poetry, philosophy, and the arts.

As for the differences, the most obvious one would be the political affiliation to the Russian Empire. From afar, it could appear as an irrelevant denominator when we talk about ecological attention and human/non-human relationships. However, support of artistic practices or the lack of it heavily impacted the entanglements of artists and the environment. When Aivazovsky was supported by the court from the beginning of his career, it allowed him to heavily influence the environment, such as the instance where his position of an official artist of the Naval Ministry allowed him to order canon volleys into the water, or when with earned from imperial commissions money he bought excessive amounts of land around Feodosia and became a sole possessor of drinkable water during droughts, when his social weight impacted the decision to build a port in Feodosia and not Sevastopol. Neither Shevchenko, who was oppressed firstly by birthright as a serf and lately because of his political beliefs, nor Voloshin, who was openly neutral, was even close to the ability to create an impact on that level.

Lastly, despite the art being an impossible topic to measure and evaluate, it would be an omission not to mention that among the three artists, Ivan Aivazovsky is the most recognised and successful during his life and posthumously.

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I believed in the person I want to become

I believed in the freedom

I believed in the kindness of strangers

(Grant, 2012)

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