

## VLADIMIR NABOKOV AND *THE WORLD OF ART*

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899-1977), whose centenary was recently celebrated all around the globe, occupies a towering position in Russian and world literature. An inexhaustible subject of research for several generations of literary scholars, widely taught and extensively translated, Nabokov and his literary legacy have a large and continuously growing audience.

Vladimir Nabokov was born in Saint Petersburg, the Russian imperial capital, into a highly cultured aristocratic family with multifaceted aesthetic interests. His father, Vladimir Dmitrievich (1870-1922), a prominent jurist and statesman of the early twentieth century, was a great connoisseur of literature, theater and music. His mother, Elena Ivanovna (née Rukavishnikov, 1876-1939), was an amateur painter. His younger brother Sergei (1900-1945) was a passionate lover of music and a piano practitioner. As Nabokov recalls, his “parents had many acquaintances who painted and danced and made music.”<sup>1</sup> At their St. Petersburg residence at Bol'shaia Morskaya 47, the Nabokovs held cultural soirées, and their house “was one of the first where the young Shaliapin sang”(ibid.). The family also had a private box at the Mariinsky Theater where Nabokov was regularly taken to opera and ballet productions. The family's diverse cultural interests are reflected in the Nabokov senior's voluminous library that, along with his professional literature, contained books on many other subjects, including art and belles-lettres. Vladimir Dmitrievich's great erudition in literature is attested to by even such unfavorably biased memoirist as Kornei Chukovsky. Chukovsky writes that V. D. Nabokov “knew literature, especially the foreign one, by heart; in the newspaper *Speech* were so certain of his being a know-it-all that they would turn to him for references /.../: where is this citation from? In what century did such and such German poet live? And Nabokov would answer.” («Литературу он знал назубок, особенно иностранную; в газете «Речь» так были уверены в его всезнайстве, что обращались к нему за справками /.../ откуда эта цитата? В каком веке жил такой-то германский поэт? И Набоков отвечал.»)<sup>2</sup>

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 171. Henceforth, all Nabokov's works in English, unless otherwise stated, will be cited from their Vintage editions in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> See Kornei Chukovsky, *Dnevnik 1901-1929* (Moscow: Sovremennyyi pisatel', 1997), 206. Here and henceforth,

In his boyhood and early youth, V. V. Nabokov entertained the idea of becoming a painter. He believed that he “was born a painter” and that he “was supposed to become a painter in due time” (*Strong Opinions* 17). Subsequently, at least “up to [his] fourteenth year,” Nabokov “used to spend most of the day drawing and painting” (*ibid.*). He studied drawing and painting under the tutelage of several artists, such as Stepan Iaremich (1869-1939) and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875-1957).

Iaremich, who was Nabokov’s drawing master from 1910 to 1912, received his artistic education in the Kievan School of Drawing under Nikolai Ge and Mikhail Vrubel. In 1900, Iaremich moved to St. Petersburg where he began his collaboration with *The World of Art*. Iaremich, whose artistic gift was quite modest, is mostly remembered as an art expert---scholar, curator, conservator. He authored the first monograph on Vrubel (1911), a book on the eighteenth-century Russian academic school (1934), and published numerous articles in various periodicals. For more than twenty years, from 1918 and until his death, Iaremich worked at the Hermitage Museum, first as the Curator of its collection of drawings and engravings and later as the Director of its Conservation Department.<sup>3</sup>

Dobuzhinsky, who succeeded Iaremich as Nabokov’s drawing master (1912-14), was a distinguished painter, book illustrator, and stage designer as well as a gifted teacher (among his many students was Marc Chagall). It was apparently Dobuzhinsky who prompted Nabokov to realize that his vocation was literature and to turn from the brush to the quill. Upon seeing young Nabokov’s first literary experiments, Dobuzhinsky told his pupil: “You have a talent for painting but you must write.”<sup>4</sup> Dobuzhinsky studied art at the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg (1885-87) and then privately under Lev Evgrafovich Dmitriev-Kavkazsky. In 1899-1901, Dobuzhinsky continued his artistic education at the Azbé and Simon Hollosy Schools in Munich. Upon his return

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all unattributed translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> See V. Levinson-Lessing, “S. P. Iaremich (1869-1939),” *Soobshcheniia Gosudarstvennogo Ėrmitazha* 2 (1940): 26-27. For additional biographical information about Iaremich, also see M. V. Dobuzhinsky, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 416 and I. S. Zil’bershtein and V. A. Samkov, comps., *Sergei Diaghilev i russkoe iskusstvo*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1982), 2: 404.

<sup>4</sup> See Dmitri Nabokov, “Speech Recorded at the Russian National Library. St. Petersburg, June 12, 1995,” *Zvezda* 11 (1996): 7.

to St. Petersburg in 1901, he joins *The World of Art*.<sup>5</sup>

*The World of Art* (Мир искусства) constitutes a major aesthetic phenomenon in Russian culture at the turn of the twentieth century. It originated in early November of 1898, less than six months before Nabokov's birth, with the appearance of the first Russian art periodical so named. The journal's benefactors were Princess Mariia Tenishev and the industrialist Savva Mamontov, its editor-in-chief--Sergei Diaghilev. Even though the periodical was a rather short-lived undertaking (its publication stopped in 1904), the name did not die out for at least another two decades. *The World of Art* became an appellation for the group that formed around highly gifted St. Petersburg painters, such as Léon Bakst, Alexander Benois, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, and Konstantin Somov. Here is a group meeting as depicted by its participant Boris Kustodiev (Fig. 1). Among the artists portrayed in the painting, aside from Kustodiev himself, there are (from left to right): Benois, Somov, and Dobuzhinsky who hosted the meeting.

Fig. 1

The group left an indelible mark on the Russian culture of the early twentieth century, specifically on painting, book graphics, and stage design.<sup>6</sup> As the journal's editor, Diaghilev played the magistral role in familiarizing the Russians with Western art, from Old Masters to contemporary, as well as with past and current trends in the art of their own country. After the periodical ceased publication, Diaghilev, a talented impresario, continued to propagate Russian contemporary art both at home and abroad for another quarter of the century (until his death in 1929) by

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<sup>5</sup> For an account of Dobuzhinsky's life, aside from the artist's own memoirs (*Vospominaniia*), see G. I. Chugunov, *Mstislav Valerianovich Dobuzhinsky* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of *The World of Art* see, for example, Alla Gusarova, "*Mir iskusstva*" (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1972); Nataliia Lapshina, "*Mir iskusstva*" (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977); Janet Kennedy, *The "Mir iskusstva" Group and Russian Art* (New York: Garland, 1977); John E. Bowl, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group* (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1979); Viacheslav Shestakov, *Iskusstvo i mir v "Mire iskusstva"* (Moscow: Slavianskii dialog, 1998).

means of art exhibits, concerts as well as opera and ballet productions.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his entire creative life, Nabokov held *The World of Art* in high esteem. Even though his tastes evolved and changed considerably over the years, Nabokov nevertheless remained true to his appraisal of *The World of Art*. Thus in 1970, in the interview with Alfred Appel Jr., who queried Nabokov on his “feelings about” such avant-garde artists as Vasily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, and Marc Chagall, the writer responded: “I prefer the experimental decade that coincided with my boyhood--Somov, Benois [...], Vrubel, Dobuzhinski, etc.” (*Strong Opinions* 170), thereby associating artistic innovation during his formative years with *The World of Art*’s chief representatives.<sup>8</sup> Although Vrubel did not belong to the group, he was revered by many of its participants. As I mentioned earlier, Stepan Iaremich, a painter and an art critic, closely affiliated with *The World of Art*, and Nabokov’s drawing master, wrote the first monograph about Vrubel that was published in 1911, while he taught Nabokov.<sup>9</sup>

What were the principal traits of *The World of Art*’s outlook that could appeal to Nabokov? First, the group rejected the utilitarian approach to art that had dominated Russian culture since the 1860s. Among the proponents of this approach at the time were the Wanderers (передвижники) and their champion, a critic Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906). Instead, *The World of Art* declared freedom of artistic expression and beauty as the art’s supreme goal and

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<sup>7</sup> Nabokov wrote the following about Diaghilev’s role in Russian culture of the early twentieth century: “Among the many names connected with the Russian Renaissance, that of Diaghilev deserves honorable mention. Although not a creative genius in the precise sense of the term, his perfect taste in art, allied to a fascinating personality and to fiery energy in the promotion of what was finest in art, gives him a prominent place in the history of Russian culture.” See Vladimir Nabokov, “Diaghilev and a Disciple,” Review of Serge Lifar, *Serge Diaghilev: An Intimate Biography*. *The New Republic*, 18 November 1940, 699.

<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that, in Nabokov’s own words, “Kandinsky and Malevich mean nothing to me and I have always found Chagall’s stuff intolerably primitive and grotesque,” especially his later works, such as “the frescoes and windows he now contributes to temples and the Parisian Opera House *plafond*.” (ibid.).

<sup>9</sup> See S. P. Iaremich, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel’: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo I. Knebel’, 1911).



independent value.<sup>10</sup> Many of *The World of Art* painters viewed the poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) as their standard, and themselves as recipients of Pushkinian education and propagators of Pushkinian culture.<sup>11</sup> This explains why so many of them, Benois (*Queen of Spades*, *Bronze Horseman*, "Captain's Daughter"), Dobuzhinsky ("The Stationmaster," *Eugene Onegin*), and Somov (*Count Nulin*), to name only a few, drew illustrations, those "graphic commentaries" in the words of Benois, for Pushkin's works.<sup>12</sup> Nabokov expressed the notions akin to those of *The World of Art* painters. In his 1940 review of a monograph on Diaghilev, Nabokov, like its subject, expressed disdain for "the utilitarian and didactic tendencies of the [eighteen] sixties and seventies."<sup>13</sup> And Nabokov maintained in his 1964 interview that "[A] work of art has no importance whatever to society" and that "what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art" (*Strong Opinions* 33). A devoted disciple of Pushkin, the translator and annotator of *Eugene Onegin*, the poet's *magnum opus*, Nabokov spoke about "the pride and purity of Pushkin's art" (op. cit. 103). And we may recall that Fedor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the protagonist of *The Gift* (Дар, 1937-38; 1952), the author's *alter*-ish if not *alter ego*,

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sergei Diaghilev, "Slozhnye voprosy; v poiskakh krasoty," *Mir iskusstva* 1 (1898): 12; also see Iaremich, *Mir iskusstva* 7 (1902), Chronicle, 22.

<sup>11</sup> See I. S. Zil'bershtein and A. N. Savinov, eds., *Aleksandr Benua razmyshliaet...* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1968), 231.

<sup>12</sup> *Aleksandr Benua razmyshliaet...*, 239.

<sup>13</sup> See Nabokov, "Diaghilev and a Disciple," 699.

similarly to his creator, “fed on Pushkin, inhaled Pushkin /..../ Pushkin entered his blood” (*The Gift* 97-98).

Another relevant aspect of *The World of Art* is its strong orientation toward Western culture. This orientation was congenial with Nabokov who grew up amid the Westernized culture of St. Petersburg, being tri-, if not quadrilingual (Russian, English, French, and German) from the early age, and was raised in the Anglophile family. The refined taste of *The World of Art* chief participants corresponded to the elitist and highly cultured atmosphere that prevailed in Nabokov’s household.

Yet another related aspect was the fascination of *The World of Art* painters with the past and their frequent depiction of old Petersburg, apparently heightened by the city’s bicentennial celebrations (1903). This penchant earned them the nickname of “retrospective dreamers.”<sup>14</sup> Nabokov’s attitude is analogous to that of *The World of Art*: he frequently depicts Petersburg of his childhood and youth which he recreates through the power of his memory, and the nostalgia for which the exiled writer expresses time and again in both his poetry and prose.

Further, *The World of Art* painters are notable for their keen attention to detail that may be specifically linked to their fascination with book graphics. As pedagogues, they strove to inculcate this approach in their students. Thus Nabokov recalls that as his drawing master, Dobuzhinsky “made me depict from memory, in the greatest possible detail, objects I had certainly seen thousands of times without visualizing them properly: a street lamp, a postbox, the tulip design on the stained glass of our own front door” (*Speak, Memory* 92). Remaining true to his teacher’s precepts, Nabokov attached utmost importance to details in his writings. This is evident already in his early story “The Fight” («Драка», 1925) at the close of which the narrator is musing: “Or perhaps what matters is not the human pain or joy at all but, rather, the play of shadow and light on a live body, the harmony of trifles assembled on this particular day, at this particular moment, in a unique and inimitable way” (*The Stories* 146). And many years later, in his Cornell lectures, Nabokov taught *his* students to “notice and fondle details,” “the divine details,” in order to understand better “the work of art [which] is invariably the creation of a new world.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, by means of its publications as well as its exhibits and performances, *The World of Art* served as a

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<sup>14</sup> See Sergei Makovsky, *Stranitsy khudozhestvennoi kritiki*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1909), 2: 115; cf. *Aleksandr Benua razmyshliaet...*, 501-2.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 1. For the expression “the divine details,” see Ross Wetzsteon, “Nabokov as Teacher,” *TriQuarterly* 17 (1970): 245.

cultural mediator between Russia and the West and was the first group to put Russia on the cultural world map. Upholding and continuing this tradition, Nabokov not only served as a cultural liaison of sorts between Russia and the Western World but also became, as Omry Ronen has recently demonstrated, the first among Russian literati to attain “the interliterary stature of a world writer.”<sup>16</sup>

From his childhood Nabokov was well acquainted with *The World of Art* journal. An avid reader, Nabokov could familiarize himself with the periodical at his father’s voluminous library.<sup>17</sup> In his boyhood and early youth, at the time when Nabokov aspired to become a painter, two of *The World of Art* representatives, Stepan Iaremich and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, as I earlier mentioned, were his drawing masters. He also recalls seeing Alexander Benois at their St. Petersburg residence (*Sobranie* 5: 172). Benois was the art critic for the daily *Speech*, edited by V. D. Nabokov, and he apparently participated in the editorial discussions held at Bol’shaia Morskaia 47. And as a boy, Nabokov most likely saw Bakst during the sessions when the artist worked on Elena Nabokov’s portrait.

Nabokov was also thoroughly familiar with works of *The World of Art* painters, as he was exposed to them daily at his St. Petersburg residence. Thus, in his English-language memoirs, first in *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) and then in *Speak, Memory* (1967), Nabokov mentions that in his father’s study, there was hanging “right over the desk, the rose-and-haze pastel portrait” (1910) of his mother by Léon Bakst (Fig. 2). The writer lovingly describes it as follows:

Fig. 2

“[T]he artist had drawn her face in three-quarter view, wonderfully bringing out its delicate features--the upward

<sup>16</sup> See Omry Ronen, “The Triple Anniversary of World Literature: Goethe, Pushkin, Nabokov,” in Gavriel Shapiro, ed., *Nabokov at Cornell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> See *Sistematicheskii katalog biblioteki Vladimira Dmitrievicha Nabokova. Pervoe prodolzhenie* (St. Petersburg, 1911), 23 (#2811).

sweep of the ash-colored hair /.../, the pure curve of the forehead, the dove-blue eyes, the graceful line of the neck” (*Speak, Memory* 190).<sup>18</sup>

In *Other Shores* (Другие берега, 1954), his Russian-language memoirs, Nabokov also describes works of *The World of Art* painters in his mother’s study. There, Alexander Benois’ “truly delightful rain-swollen *Bretagne* and russet-green *Versailles* neighbored by ‘delectable’ (in parlance of those times) Bakst’s *Turks* and Somov’s aquarelle *Rainbow* amidst wet birches” («действительно прелестные, дождем набухшая «Бретань» и рыжезеленый «Версаль» соседствовали с «вкусными», как тогда говорилось, «Турками» Бакста и сомовской акварельной «Радугой» среди мокрых берез»).<sup>19</sup>

Unlike the familiar present location of Elena Ivanovna Nabokov’s portrait by Bakst—after the Bolshevik coup d’état, it became part of the State Russian Museum collection—, the whereabouts of the paintings that adorned Nabokov’s mother’s study are unknown. Based on Nabokov’s description, however, it is possible to discern what they looked like by means of their presumable variants. Thus, Nabokov’s description of the two paintings by Benois parallels the artist’s *Breton Landscape* (1906) and his *Versailles. At Kouros* (1897) from the series *The Last Promenades of Louis XIV* (1897-98) (both St. Petersburg, the State Russian Museum).

Fig.3

Fig.4

“Delectable” *Turks* most likely refer to Bakst’s costume designs for the ballet *Schéhérazade* (1910), such as the one for the role of Shahriar (Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection); whereas Somov’s watercolor *Rainbow* could be visualized through its following probable variation (1908) (Moscow, State Tret’iakov Gallery) (Figs. 3-6).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Also see Vladimir Nabokov, *Conclusive Evidence* (New York: Harper, 1951), 134.

<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 5 vols. (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 1999-2000), 5: 172. Henceforth, all Nabokov’s works in Russian are cited from this edition in the body of the text.

<sup>20</sup> See, respectively, Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *The World of Art. On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists 1898* (St. Petersburg and Helsinki: Palace Editions, 1998), ill. 99 and 58; Alexander Schouvaloff,

Fig. 5

Fig.6

In light of all this, it is not surprising that Nabokov frequently refers or alludes to works of *The World of Art* painters in his fiction. One such example appears in *Other Shores*. Nabokov recalls that at the age of six he could read in English but not in Russian, with the exception of the word “kakao” (see *Sobranie* 5: 152-53).<sup>21</sup> This example, however, contains a peculiar aberration: aside from Russian, “kakao” is spelled with two ‘k’s in German, but not in English, or for that matter in French, in which the word is spelled with two ‘c’s—“cacao.” It is very likely, however, that the word flashed through Nabokov’s mind because he recalled Dobuzhinsky’s watercolor *City Grimaces* (Гримасы города, 1908, Moscow, State Tret’iakov Gallery) (Fig. 7).

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Léon Bakst: *The Theatre Art* (London: Sotheby’s Publications, 1991), 90-91; Irina Pruzhan, *Konstantin Somov* (Moscow: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1972), ill. 46.

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney identifies Bakst’s *Turks* as “a number of watercolor sketches made for the Scheherazade ballet” (1910) but erroneously attributes this citation to Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*; see her “‘Ballet Attitudes’: Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Petipa’s *The Sleeping Beauty*” in *Nabokov at the Limits. Redrawing Critical Boundaries*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (New York: Garland, 1999), 114. It is worth noting that many years later Nabokov mentions Shahriar (spelled Scheher) and Scheherazade in *Ada* (229-30).

It is possible that in referring to *Turks*, Nabokov had a composite image of Bakst’s sketches and those by Boris Anisfeld (1879-1973), whose style was influenced by Bakst’s work. Anisfeld designed the stage and costumes for the 1912 *Islamey* ballet set to Mily Balakirev’s music and, like *Schéhérazade*, based on the *Arabian Nights*. Several costume sketches by Anisfeld, such as *Moor* and *Eunuch*, were originally in the possession of V. D. Nabokov. See Petrova, *The World of Art*, 253-54.

<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that in *Conclusive Evidence* this inability was stated but not exemplified, whereas in *Speak, Memory* another example--“mama”-- was added. See, respectively, *Conclusive Evidence* 10 and *Speak, Memory* 28.

Fig. 7

The watercolor shows the city street on a sleety day. In the foreground, it depicts an organ grinder, a cap in his hand, and his trained monkey wearing a red dress and holding a feathered cap. With their caps removed, this amusing circus-like duo pays its respects to a funeral procession. This scene appears even more contradictory, if not grotesque, as in the background, in sharp opposition to somberness of the procession, there is an advertisement that portrays a smiling red-cheeked female in a tight bodice, and a large pointing hand that presumably calls upon passers-by to drink cocoa.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that at the time “kakao,” apparently a less common beverage than tea and coffee, was vigorously advertised. For example, St. Petersburg daily *Novoe Vremia* for 1908 contains cocoa ads of three different companies, Bensdorp, Blooker, and Van Guten.

Another example related to *The World of Art* is a very specific description of snow that recurrently appears in Nabokov's works. We come across such description in *The Gift*, Nabokov's last Russian novel, where it is characterized as “the snow of *The World of Art*” («снег «Мира Искусства»»). In the English translation, however, apparently out of concern for the reader unfamiliar with Russian culture, it is rendered merely as “stylized snow” (*Sobranie* 4: 376 / *The Gift* 196). Many years later, Nabokov elaborated on this image in *Other Shores* where he speaks of “the vertically coming down oversized snowflakes of *The World of Art*” («вертикально падающий крупный снег «Мира Искусства»») (*Sobranie* 5: 289).

This image harks back to Nabokov's poem “The Skater” («Конькобежец», 1925) whose last stanza contains the following lines: “I left a verbal design / an instantly uncircled flower. / And tomorrow the noiceless and

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Alla Gusarova, comp., *Mstislav Dobuzhinskii: Zhivopis', grafika, teatr* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1982), 18.

vertical snow / will powder the rink crossed with lines" («Оставил я один узор словесный, / мгновенно раскружившийся цветок.../ И завтра снег бесшумный и отвесный / запорошит исчерченный каток» (*Sobranie* 1: 635). As I demonstrated elsewhere, the poem, which was composed on February 5, 1925, that is a little over two months before Nabokov's marriage to Véra Slonim (April 15), was dedicated to her by means of anagrammatized inscription.<sup>23</sup> In "The Skater," Nabokov recreates the wintry atmosphere of St. Petersburg, his and Véra's native city.<sup>24</sup> This is suggested by the description of snow as "noiseless and vertical" («бесшумный и отвесный») which once again may be linked to the recurrent *World of Art* image.

This image re-emerges in Nabokov's first novel *Mary* (Машенька, 1926) on which the writer started working in the spring of 1925, shortly after composing "The Skater."<sup>25</sup> In Ganin's recollection of his meetings with Mary, set in St. Petersburg, there is a mention of "soft oversized snowflakes [which] came down vertically in the gray, mat-glass air" («валил отвесно крупный мягкий снег в сером, как матовое стекло, воздухе» (*Mary* 69 / *Sobranie* 1: 96).

What is the source of this image that Nabokov links to *The World of Art*? The writer sheds some light on it in *Speak, Memory* where he associates "the stylized snowscape of the 'Art World,' *Mir Iskusstva*" with "Dobuzhinski, Alexandre Benois" who, as he puts it, referring to his youth, were "so dear to me in those days" (*Speak, Memory* 236).

In linking the "stylized snowscape" to Dobuzhinsky and Benois, Nabokov, in all likelihood, invokes such paintings by these artists, as *A Little House in St. Petersburg* (Домик в Петербурге, 1905) (Moscow, State Tret'iakov Gallery) and *Parade under Paul I* (Парад при Павле Первом, 1907) (St. Petersburg, The State Russian

<sup>23</sup> See Gavriel Shapiro, "Setting His Myriad Faces in His Text: Nabokov's Authorial Presence Revisited," in *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Nabokov's earlier longer poem *Petersburg* (1923) in which he describes the city's skating rinks (*Sobranie* 1: 597-98).

<sup>25</sup> See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 241.

Museum), respectively (Figs. 8 and 9), which depict vertically falling oversized snowflakes.

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

It appears that in *Mary*, however, Nabokov alludes to yet another work by Benois. To this attests the following section that immediately precedes the earlier quoted “snow” sentence: “Mary did not move to St. Petersburg until November. They met under the same arch where Liza dies in Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*” («И только в ноябре Машенька переселилась в Петербург. Они встретились под той аркой, где—в опере Чайковского—гибнет Лиза») (*Mary* 69 / *Sobranie* 1: 96). Although Nabokov refers here to Chaikovsky’s opera—he never misses an opportunity to mock his music and especially his “hideous and insulting” (*Strong Opinions* 266) libretti—he most likely suggests here Pushkin’s eponymous tale, and specifically, with this snow image, the episode of Hermann’s waiting by the Countess’s house. This episode of Pushkin’s tale, as we may recall, contains the description of horrendous weather during which “wet snow fell in large flakes” («мокрый снег падал хлопьями»)<sup>26</sup>.

Fig. 10

As can be seen, in the corresponding illustration, *Hermann at the Countess’s Driveway* (Германн у подъезда графини, 1905) (Fig. 10), Benois depicts snow as vertically falling and in large-size flakes. Nabokov could have

<sup>26</sup> See, respectively, Alexander Pushkin, *Complete Prose Fiction*, transl. Paul Debreczeny (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 222; A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols. (Moscow and Leningrad: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1937-59), 8: 239.



seen this piece as early as 1905 when Benois painted it. More likely, however, the writer familiarized himself with it in the 1911 and 1917 publications of Pushkin's masterpiece accompanied with Benois' illustrations.<sup>27</sup>

Snow imagery, which often recurs in Nabokov's works, appears to epitomize his Russian past. This is evident in the section of *Speak, Memory* in which the writer recalls Mademoiselle, his French governess, "rolling into our [his and his brother Sergei's] existence in December 1905" (*Speak, Memory* 95). The description ends with the following digression that echoes the story "The Visit to the Museum" («Посещение музея», 1939) and the poem "To Prince S. M. Kachurin" («К кн. С. М. Качурину», 1947):

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers. (*Speak, Memory* 99-100)

The corresponding passage in *Other Shores* reads:

Совершенно прелестно, совершенно безлюдно. Но что же я-то тут делаю, посреди стереоскопической феерии? Как попал я сюда? Точно в дурном сне, удалились сани, оставив стоящего на страшном русском снегу моего двойника в американском пальто на викуньевом меху. Саней нет как нет; бубенчики их—лишь раковинный звон крови у меня в ушах. Домой-- за спасительный океан! Однако двойник медлит. Все тихо, все околдовано светлым диском над русской пустыней моего прошлого. Снег-- настоящий наощупь; и когда

<sup>27</sup> Ironically, both Benois and Dobuzhinsky created stage and costume designs for the production of Chaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, respectively, at the Petrograd Theater of Opera and Ballet (formerly Mariinsky) (1921) and at the Kaunas State Theater (1934).

наклоняюсь, чтобы набрать его в горсть, полвека жизни рассыпается морозной пылью у  
меня промеж пальцев. (*Sobranie* 5: 204)<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, the concrete snow imagery discussed earlier—"the vertically coming down oversized snowflakes"--acquires a special importance, as it points to the significant role with which Nabokov endows this metonymic formula of *The World of Art* cityscape when he recreates the past in his fictional universe. Finally, taken altogether, Nabokov's references to *The World of Art* manifest his tribute to the magnificent art of its painters through whose artistic prism the writer frequently looks from great temporal and spatial distance at his native land.

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<sup>28</sup> The phrase "frost-dust" (*Conclusive Evidence* 61 and *Speak, Memory* 100) which is given as «морозной пылью» in *Другие берега* (*Sobranie* 5: 204) undoubtedly alludes to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* where it appears in Chapter One, Canto XVI in the episode, set in wintry St. Petersburg, of Onegin's riding in a sleigh to dinner at the famous Talon restaurant. In his English translation of the novel in verse, Nabokov renders the phrase as "frostdust" which, as he explains, he preferred over "the more elegant but less accurate: 'the powder of the frost'." See, respectively, Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, transl. from the Russian, with a Commentary, by Vladimir Nabokov, revised edition, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 1: 101 and 2: 70.





Fig. 1





Fig. 2



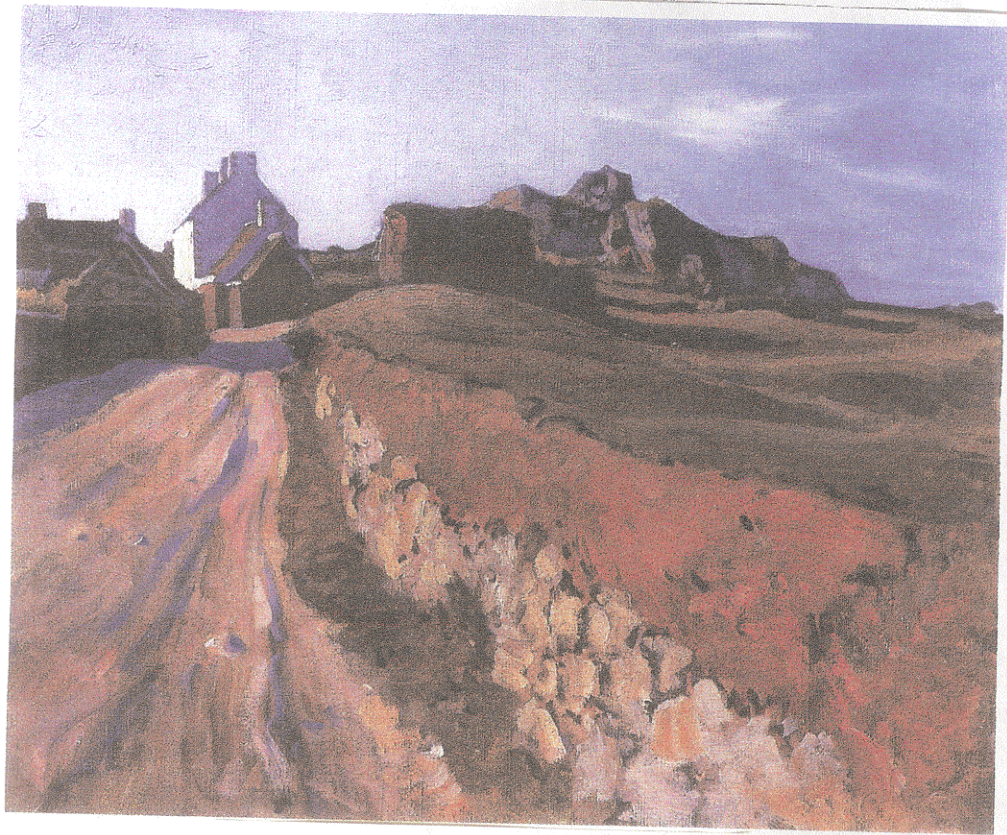


Fig. 3



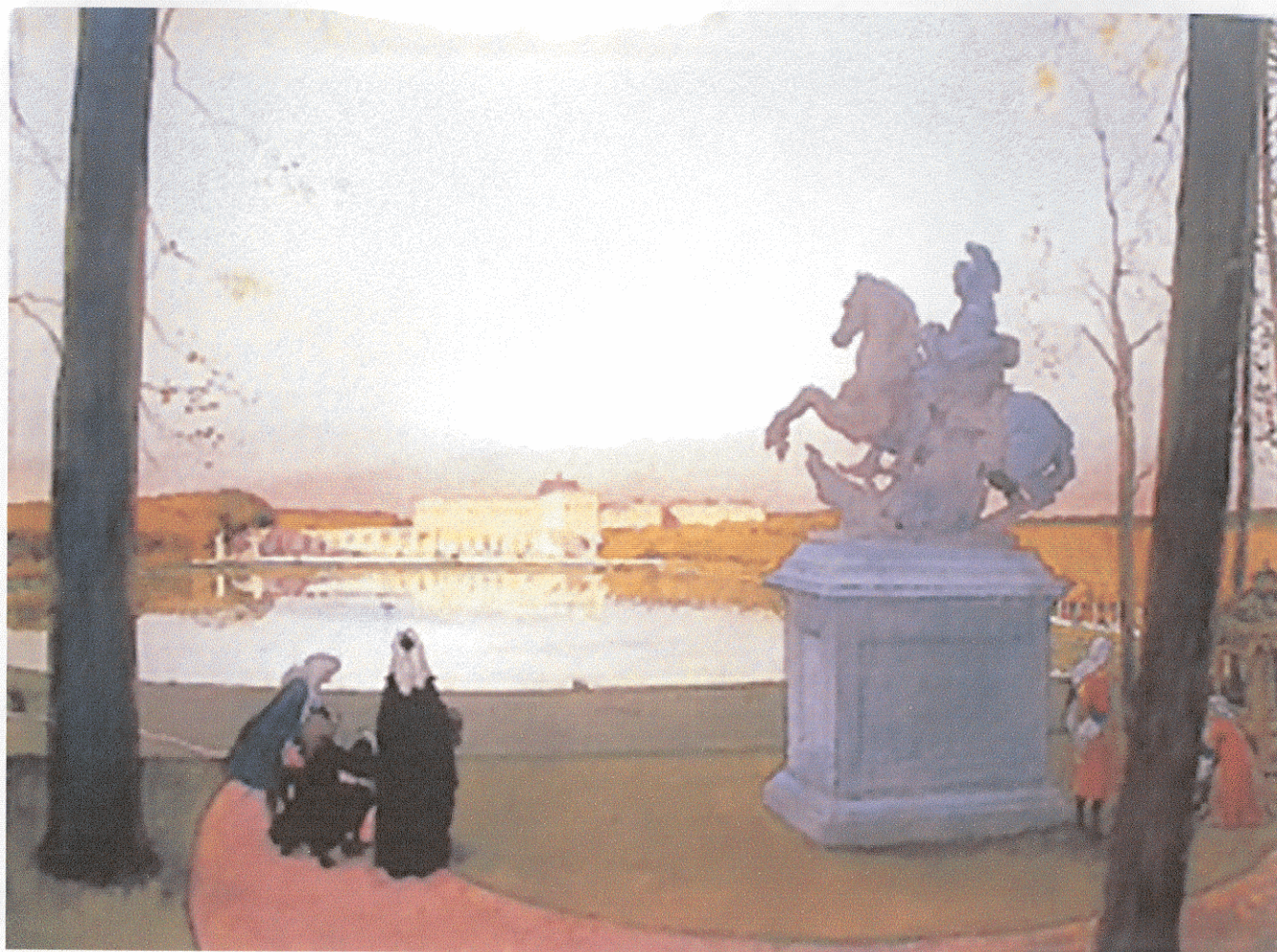


Fig. 4



Costume design for Alexis Boulgakov  
(1872–1954) as Shahriar in *Schéhérazade*,  
1910  
355 × 220  
THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA COLLECTION



Fig. 5



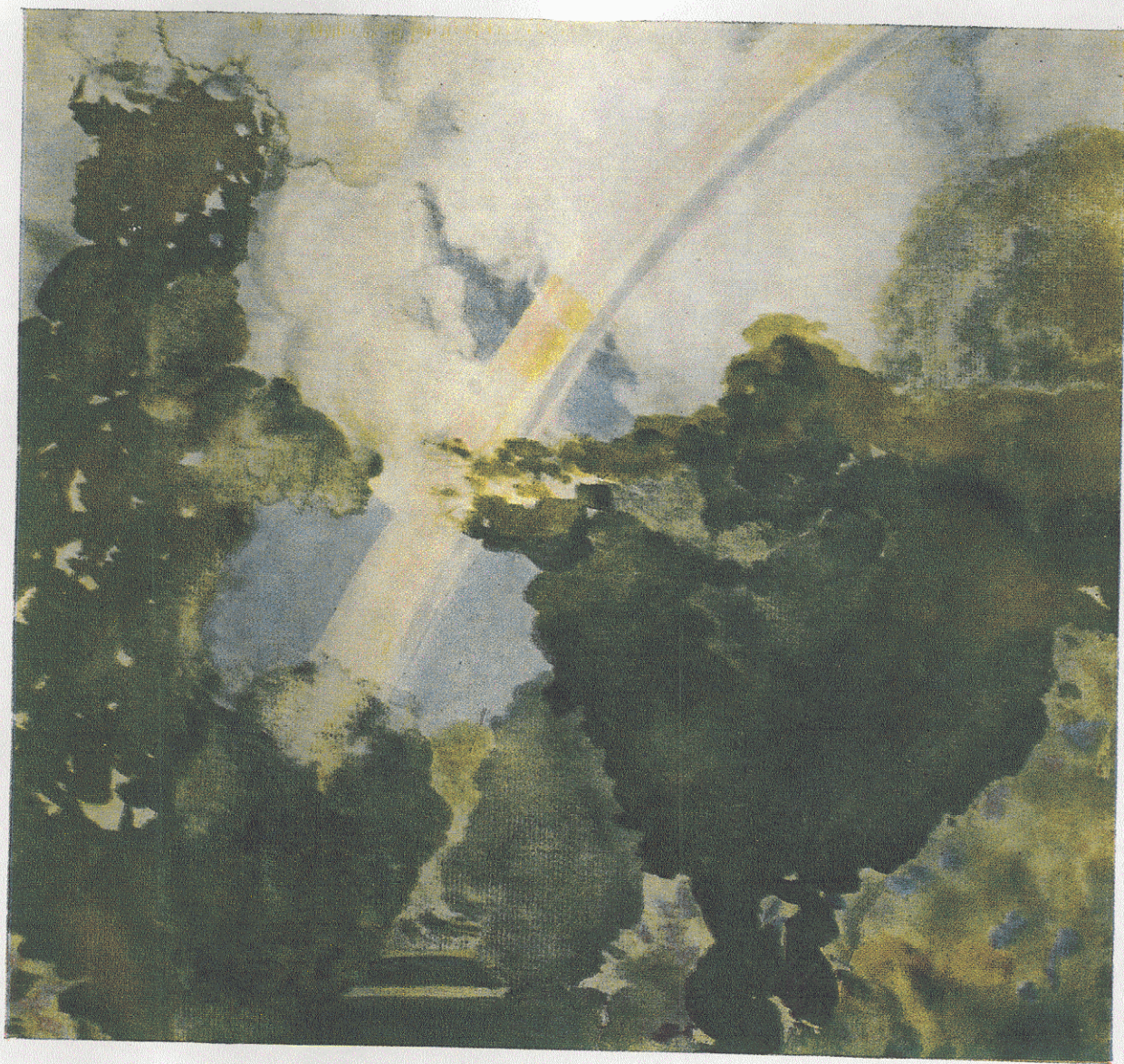


Fig. 6



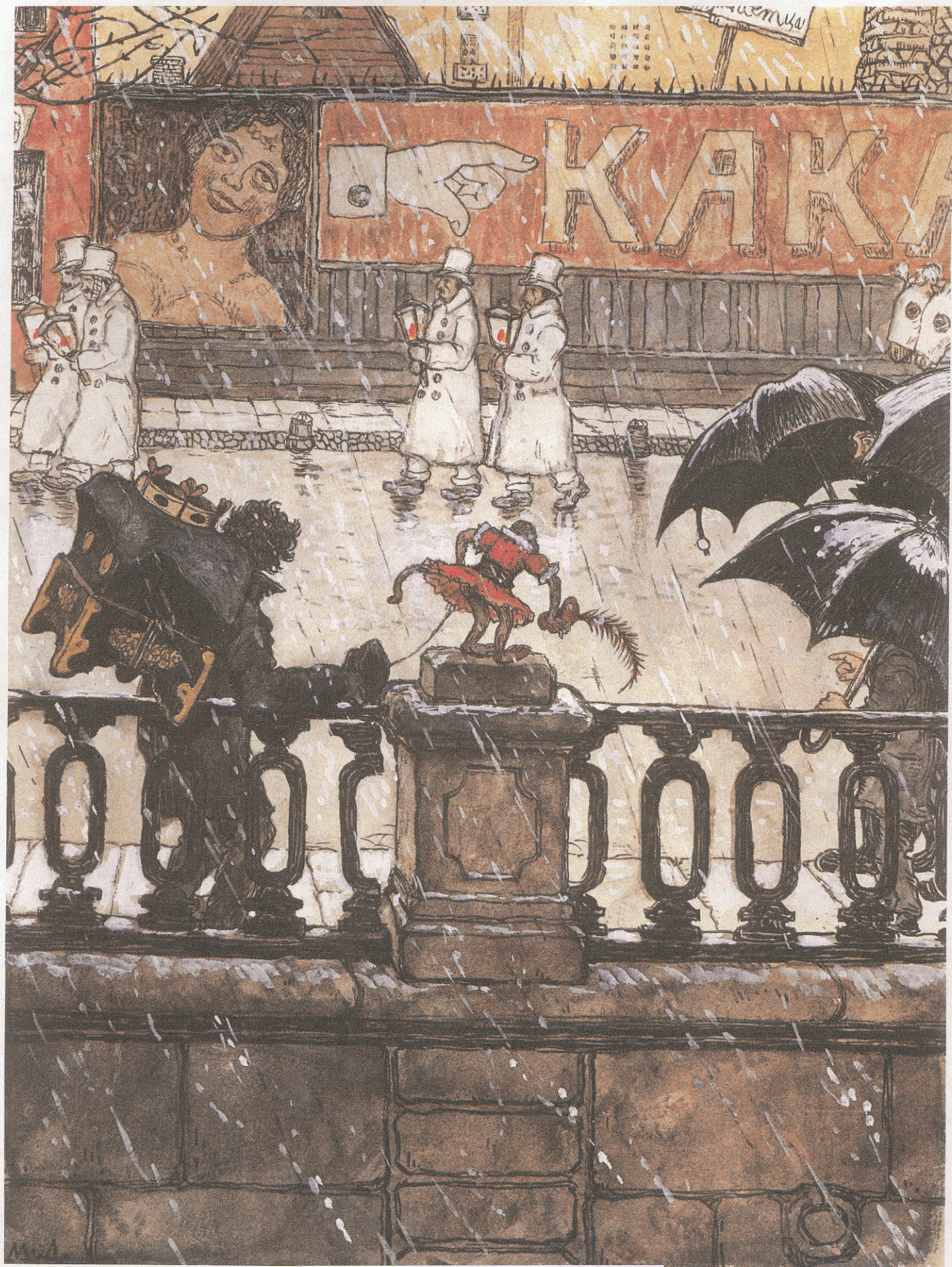


Fig. 7





Fig. 8





Fig. 9





Fig. 10