

A Russian Luminist School?

Arkhip Kuindzhi's Red Sunset on the Dnepr¹

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ONE OF the Metropolitan Museum's recent acquisitions in European painting is a large landscape by the Russian, or, strictly speaking, Ukrainian, painter, Arkhip Ivanovich Kuindzhi (1842–1910): *Red Sunset on the Dnepr* (Figure 1). Despite its late date, 1905–08, the work is representative both of Kuindzhi's own artistic career and of what might be called a Russian luminist school. To those unfamiliar with the history of modern Russian art, this painting, reminiscent in its expressivity of the work of Western luminists such as Bierstadt and Feuerbach, might seem to be a curious anomaly. But in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian painting, *Red Sunset on the Dnepr* is a remarkable and important work. Its presence in the Museum will help focus attention on a field of aesthetic study still neglected and misinterpreted.

A peculiar conjunction of circumstances in Western scholarship of Russian art, not least the disproportionate emphasis on the Russian avant-garde and the accepted belief that Russian painting of the later nineteenth century was totally didactic and literary, has contributed to a general ignorance, or at best, inaccurate conception of Russian Realism and Naturalism. Of course, Russian painting and literature of the second half of the nineteenth century were often tendentious and ideological; moreover, their execution tended to be mediocre, as the artists lacked the technical prowess of a Daumier or a Menzel. In addition, Russian paint-

ers were often inspired by the lesser works of the Barbizons or the mid-century German landscapists.

The emphasis on historical and socio-political relevance that is associated with a Repin canvas or a Tolstoi novel caused many of the Russian Realists to neglect the intrinsic painterly aspects of their work. Despite the tonal contrasts in Ilya Repin's *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan* (1885, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; copy in the Metropolitan Museum), the Impressionist light effects in his *Annual Remembrance Meeting by the Wall of the Communards at the Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris* (1883, Tretyakov Gallery), or the linear sensitivity of Aleksei Savrasov's landscapes, the work of many Russian painters of the second half of the nineteenth century was concerned more with story than technique. The Realists did not conceive of the picture as a hermetic unit, but instead always tried to place it within a social and historical framework. The pictorial devices of inserting figures pointing to or looking at something beyond the picture frame, or introducing a sequence of buildings or interiors leading from the pictorial to the external world, give such pictures a sense of movement or continuum.

1. The system of transliteration used here is that used by the University of Glasgow journal *Soviet Studies*, except in the case of hard and soft signs, which have not been rendered. The spelling of Kuindzhi as Kuindji or Kuindjii, which occurs in some Western sources, is not phonetically valid.

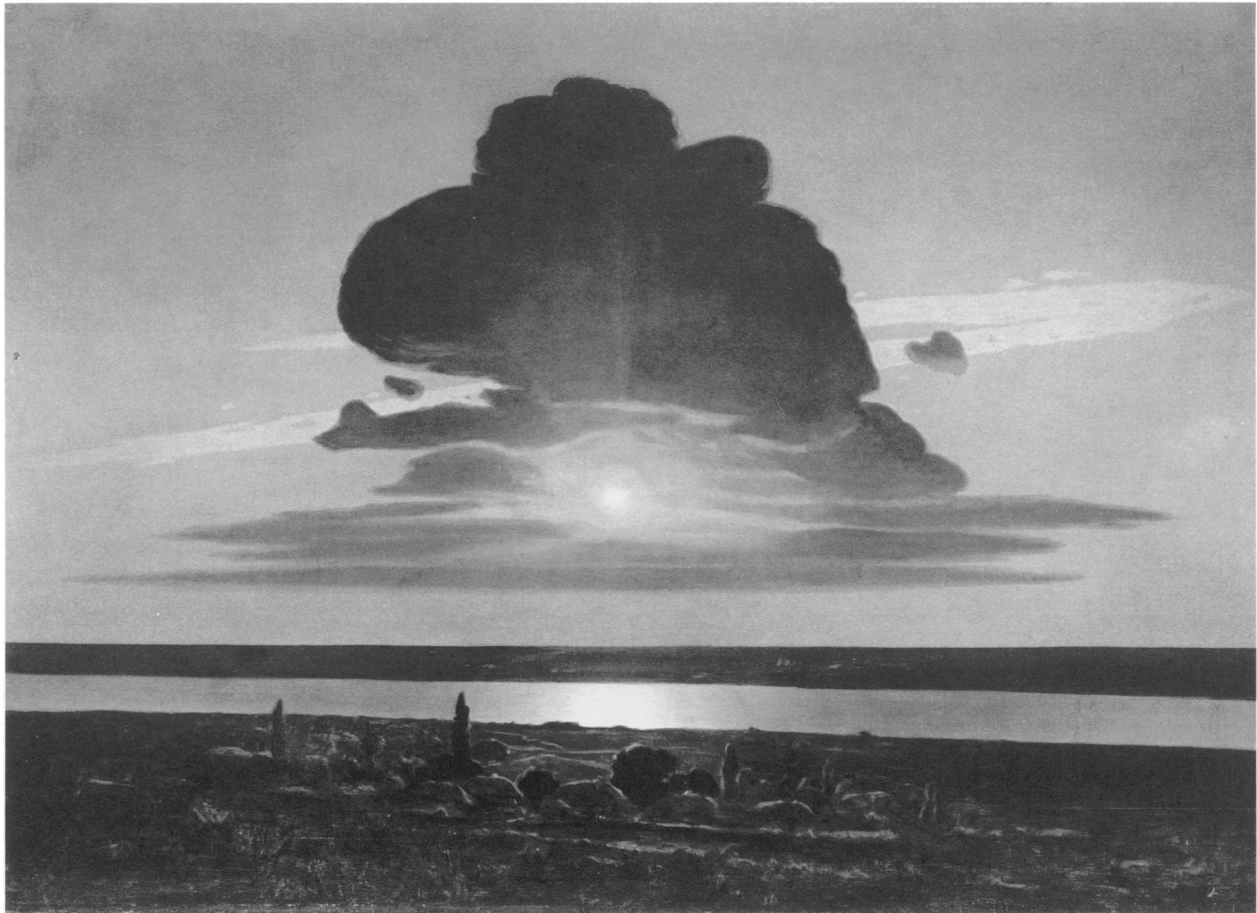


FIGURE 1

Red Sunset on the Dnepr, by Arkhip Kuindzhi. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1974.100

However, it also means that figures and objects tend to become mere parts of a narrative progression. It was because of this that many of the Realist portraits, however precise and concrete, lacked psychological depth, prompting the critic and artist Alexandre Benois to speak of their “materialism.”² This concentration on physical appearance was stimulated in part by the Positivist ideas supported by so many intellectuals, and by the dicta of Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Nikolai Dobrolyubov. Chernyshevsky, writing about esthetics in 1855, stated that “that object is beautiful which displays life in itself or reminds us of life.”³ These literary theories are paralleled visually by the works of Vasilii Perov, Repin, Nikolai Yaroshenko, and other Realists.

From 1860 to 1880 this coincidence of views occa-

sioned uncommon sympathy and unity between writers and artists, culminating in several memorable portraits of writers, for example, Repin’s portrait of Vsevolod Garshin (Figure 2). When we examine this portrait, the Realists’ weaknesses become apparent. Although the colors have faded considerably, as they have in many of the Realists’ works, it is obvious that Repin was little interested in color itself. The somber browns extended the melancholy of “The Red Flower,” Garshin’s best-known story. Despite the energetic brushwork and the intense expression of the eyes, the value of Repin’s work is now primarily historical rather than artistic.

Whatever their defects, the Russian Realists were the avant-garde of their time who decisively influenced the evolution of Russian art. Even when we place them in

2. A. Benois, *Istoriya russkoi zhivopisi v XIX veke* (St. Petersburg, 1901–02) p. 185.

3. N. Chernyshevsky, *Esteticheskie otnosheniya iskusstva k deistvitelnosti* (Moscow, 1948) p. 10.

the larger context of Western European painting and see their achievement eclipsed by the more exciting works of artists such as Daumier, Gavarni, and Menzel, we should not forget their cultural contributions in Russia. In their reaction against stagnant academic traditions, in their concern with great moments of Russia's past, and in their pictorial commentaries on the "accursed problems" of Russian society, the Russian Realists helped to awaken a new national identity.

The sympathy and patronage of collectors such as Nikolai, Ivan, Fedor Tereshchenko, and Pavel Tret'yakov, and of critics such as Vladimir Stasov, did much to further their cause, as did the founding of the Realist *Tovarishchestvo Peredvizhnykh Khudozhestvennykh Vystavok* (The Society of Wandering Art Exhibitions) in 1870. This enabled them to dominate the Russian artistic world until about 1890. The purpose of the Society was to disseminate its members' art not only in the major cities, but also in the provincial centers. Through this powerful apparatus of propagation, the works of artists such as Ivan Kramskoi, Grigorii Myasoedov, Perov, and Repin became a cultural experience no longer limited to a social élite.

But this is not to say that a "non-Realist" tendency did not also exist. Kramskoi, for example, one of the leading members of the Wanderers, painted several "philosophical" and mystical paintings such as *The Sirens* (1871, Tret'yakov Gallery). His illustrations for the 1874 edition of Gogol's "A Terrible Vengeance"⁴ are as bizarre as any by Böcklin or Redon.

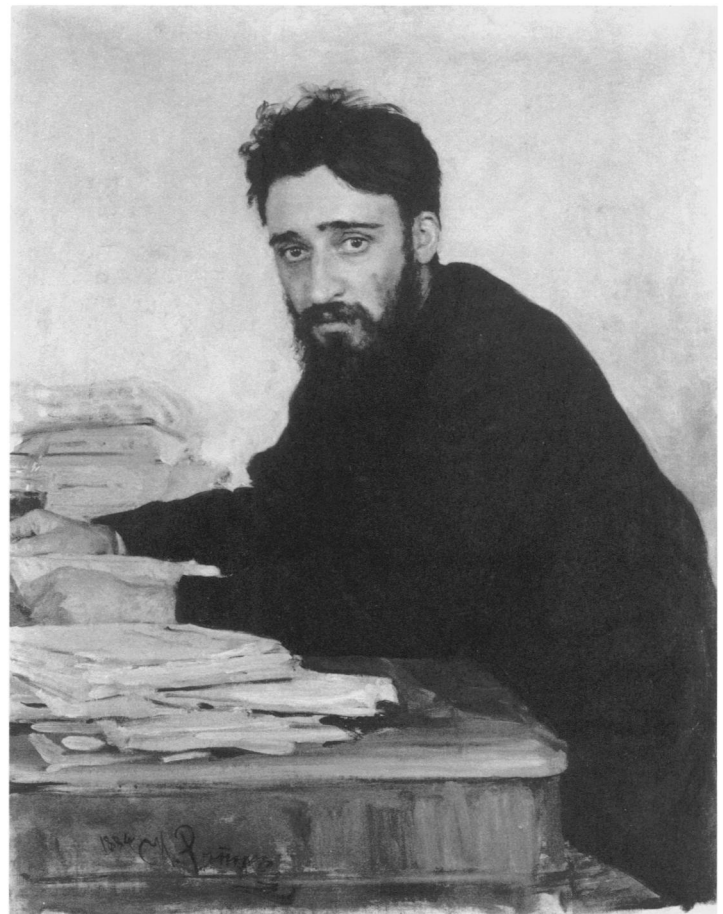
Arkhip Kuindzhi, although a member of the Wanderers from 1874 to 1879, hardly concerned himself with the Realist credo and favored a more lyrical, subjective interpretation of life and art. Not surprisingly, therefore, his brief association with the Wanderers ended in a bitter quarrel with fellow-member Mikhail Klodt, and an air of distrust clouded his relationship with Repin. Because of his rejection of the Realists' beloved narrative themes and his exclusive attention to mood and sensibility, Kuindzhi occupies a distinctive position in the history of nineteenth-century Russian art.

Luminism is usually associated with the nineteenth-

century American and German schools of landscape painting rather than the Russian. While there was certainly no Russian equivalent of the Hudson River School, there were, however, a few isolated artists, among them Klever (Figure 3), Shishkin (Figure 4), and above all, Kuindzhi, who demonstrated an acute sensitivity to the effects of natural light. With the exception of Shishkin, the Russian luminists did not transmit that aerial clarity and crystalline light that is associated with the work of Bierstadt, Church, Heade, and Lane; nor did they "dehumanize" the scene as, for example, Kensett tended to do. The Russian luminists expressed personal feelings through idiosyncratic composition, facture, and color combinations. However, what John

FIGURE 2

Portrait of Vsevolod Garshin, by Ilya Repin. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of the Humanities Fund, Inc.



4. This was the second of a three-part edition of Gogol's *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikanki* [*Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*], published in Moscow by Golyashkin in 1874–76.



FIGURE 3
Landscape at Twilight near Orel, by Yuriy Yurievich Klever. Oil on canvas. Raydon Gallery, New York

FIGURE 4
Rye, by Ivan Shishkin. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Baur has said of the American luminist works—"we seem to be reading not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves"⁵—is also true, to some extent, of the Russians, although their expressionism is less impersonal⁶ than that of the American movement.

It is, of course, hazardous to attempt to establish in retrospect the existence of a Russian luminist school; many of those key elements that influenced the American luminists—the general familiarity with Western European painting, and in particular with Dutch landscapes, the influence of Emersonian transcendentalism, and the tradition of naïve painting—were all missing, or at least secondary, in the development of nineteenth-century Russian painting. On the other hand, the interest in photography in mid and late nineteenth-century Russia among both artists (for example, Ge, Kramskoi, Kuindzhi, and Repin) and the public, the very topography of the Russian landscape that contains the horizontals and planes so beloved by the American luminists, and the discoveries of Russian physicists such as Kliment Timiryazev, could not fail to affect the optical sense of the Russian artist. In painting, these factors generated qualities readily identifiable as luminist—brilliant and refractive light, strong horizontal structure, attention to detail, panoramic space—qualities manifest in the work of Kuindzhi. The audacious spectral contrasts and light effects of his epic landscapes both separate Kuindzhi from the usual tendentious work of so many of his contemporaries and at the same time anticipate the extraordinary experiments of the twentieth-century Russian avant-garde, and ultimately point to "painting as an end in itself."

Arkhip Kuindzhi⁷ (Figure 5) was born in 1842 in the Ukrainian village of Mariupol. Greek by origin, with some Tartar blood, the Kuindzhi family was too poor to give their son a formal education. As an artist, there-



FIGURE 5
Arkhip Ivanovich Kuindzhi, photograph taken in the 1900s

fore, he was initially self-taught. This is noticeable in his weakness in and avoidance of classical perspective and anatomy. From his youth, Kuindzhi was interested in the effects of light and space; the sweeping Ukrainian vistas that he had known as a young shepherd had a lasting influence on his art. About 1855, Kuindzhi went to Feodosiya on the Black Sea to study with the seascape painter Ivan Aivazovsky, although according to some sources he was engaged merely to mix paints and received no formal instruction from the master.⁸ Never-

5. John I. H. Baur, "American Luminism," *Perspectives USA*, no. 1 (New York, 1954) p. 98.

6. Barbara Novak uses the term "impersonal expressionism" in her *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1969) p. 98.

7. Of the following publications relating directly to Kuindzhi, the two most recent are the most accurate: M. Nevedomsky and I. Repin, *Kuindzhi* (St. Petersburg, 1913); A. Rostislavov, *A. I. Kuindzhi* (St. Petersburg, 1914); M. Nevedomsky, *Kuindzhi* (Moscow, 1937); I. Repin, "Arkhip Ivanovich Kuindzhi," *Dalekoblizkie* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1937) pp. 405–420; V. Zimenko,

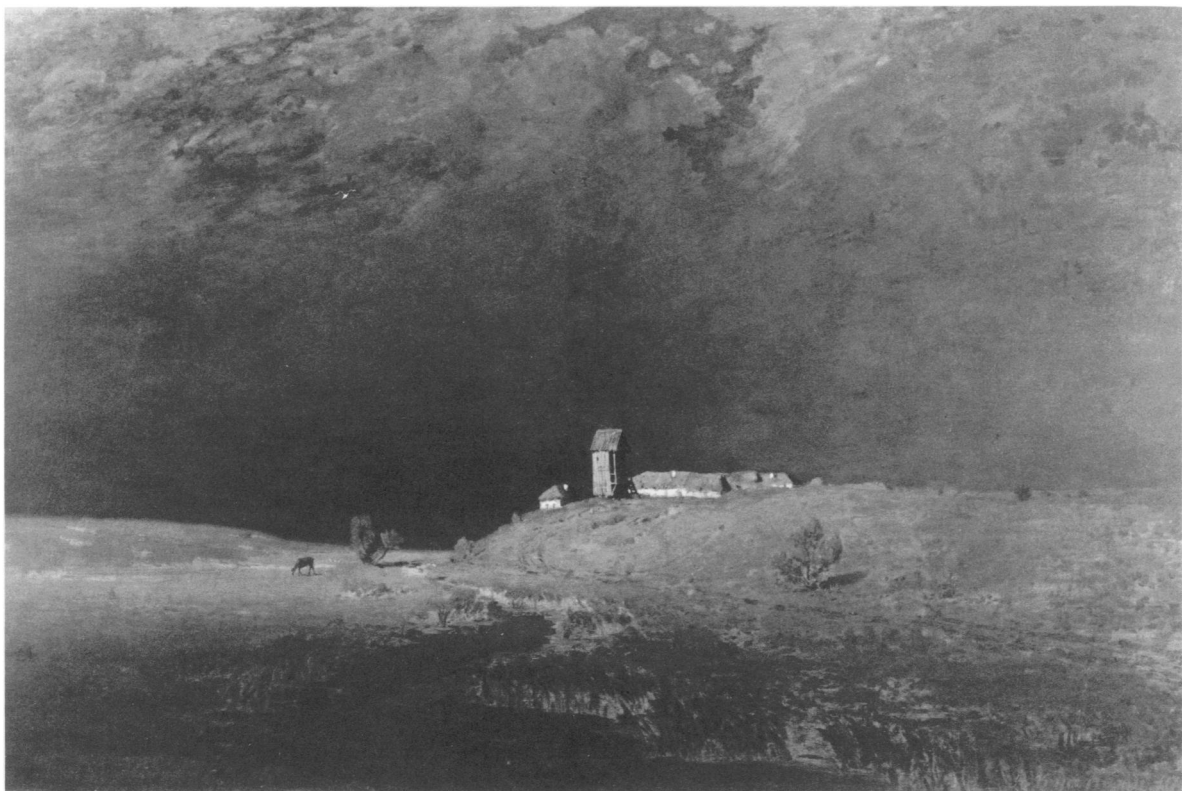
Arkhip Ivanovich Kuindzhi (Moscow-Leningrad, 1947); Z. Lukina, ed., *Kuindzhi i ego ucheniki* (exhibition catalogue, Academy of Arts, Leningrad, 1973); V. Manin, "Kuindzhi i 'kuindzhisty,'" *Iskusstvo*, no. 8 (Moscow, 1974) pp. 55–59. Until now nothing has been published in English devoted specifically to Kuindzhi.

8. According to Nevedomsky and Repin 1913, p. 9. A. Rylov repeats this in his memoirs, *Vospominaniya* (Leningrad, 1960) p. 41. The date of Kuindzhi's sojourn (or sojourns) in Feodosiya is given as 1855 by Nevedomsky 1937, p. 9. Manin, p. 55, indicates, however, that Kuindzhi was with Aivazovsky in 1866–67. It is possible that Kuindzhi worked under Aivazovsky both in the 1850s and 60s.



FIGURE 6 Moonlight over Capri, by Ivan Aivazovsky. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery

FIGURE 7 After the Storm, by Arkhip Kuindzhi. Oil on canvas, State Tretyakov Gallery



theless, the elemental sense of light and form associated with Aivozovsky's sunsets, storms, and surging oceans permanently influenced the young Kuindzhi, although he would later smile at that sleight of hand that could produce a stormy seascape in under two hours (Figure 6).

On his return to Mariupol in the autumn of 1855, Kuindzhi became a photograph retoucher, a trade he plied throughout the late 1850s and 1860s in Odessa and after 1862 in St. Petersburg. As in the case of Kramskoi, and to a lesser extent, of Perov and Repin, the influence of photography on Kuindzhi's sensitivity to light was considerable. It prompted his complex manipulation of images and refractions of the spectrum as if he were extending the black/white antithesis of photography. In 1868, after several unsuccessful attempts, Kuindzhi entered the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, concentrated on landscape, and graduated in 1872.

Although Kuindzhi joined the Society of Wandering Art Exhibitions in 1874, his artistic sensibility differed profoundly from that of his colleagues. Kuindzhi's use of contrasting primary colors—what one critic referred to as his “cosmic tones”⁹—distinguished him immedi-

ately from the somber, conservative color harmonies of Kramskoi, Repin, and Yaroshenko. Unlike the Impressionists, with whom, after his first trip to Paris in 1875, he was well acquainted, he conceived light almost as a concrete entity and endeavored to transmit to it a fullness and density quite alien to the analytical, fragmentary effects of Monet or Sisley. Benois's description of Kuindzhi as the “Russian Monet”¹⁰ was, therefore, a misleading one, although he was right to regard them both as exponents of “paint itself.”

Kuindzhi's conception of light is embodied in *Ukrainian Night* (1876), one of his finest and most provocative works of the 1870s. Its very material rendition of nocturnal light and its immediate evocation of mood rather than story deeply impressed spectators both at the fifth Wanderers' exhibition of 1876 and at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878. The atmospheric quality of *Ukrainian Night* is also present in *After the Storm* (Figure 7) and *Morning on the Dnepr* (Figure 8), both of which are foremost examples of the nineteenth-century Russian landscape school. *Ukrainian Night* was followed in 1879 by the first version of perhaps Kuindzhi's best-known painting, *The Birch Grove* (Figure 9). This highly emotive picture, which

9. Nevedomsky and Repin 1913, p. 7.

10. Benois, p. 205.

FIGURE 8 *Morning on the Dnepr*, by Arkhip Kuindzhi. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery





FIGURE 9

Birch Grove, by Arkhip Kuindzhi. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery

caused some people to “stand open-mouthed before it and others to weep,”¹¹ combines a touchingly simple main theme and a complex, zig-zag composition. The progression from foreground to background through bands of shadow and light, the extreme contrasts in tone, as well as the abrupt truncation of the tree tops, invest the work with a peculiar, photographic quality—that “stereoscopic reliefness”¹² that contemporaries identified with Kuindzhi’s luminism.

This development culminated in the exquisite *Night on the Dnepr* (1880, Russian Museum, Leningrad) a masterpiece of luminist effect, which was exhibited in 1880 at Kuindzhi’s first one-man show. While including the stylistic principles of *The Birch Grove*—the central focus and rapid gradation of tones—Kuindzhi introduced a radical change in his construction of space, by presenting a bird’s-eye view. Kuindzhi was intrigued by the notion of flying (his love of birds is legendary), and many of his later works rely on an aerial perspective similar to that of *Night on the Dnepr*. The picture caused a sensation; its magical charm caused “the whole of St. Petersburg . . . to besiege the premises of the exhibition.”¹³ It was immediately

bought by Grand Prince Konstantin Konstantinovich and was given a special showing at the *Galerie Sedelmeyer*, Paris, later in the year. Soon oleographic reproductions of it abounded. The impact of this painting on St. Petersburg society was great:

This is not just a move forward for painting, it is a leap, a vast leap. This painting has an unprecedented potency of colors. The impression it gives is a decidedly magical one; it is not a painting, but nature herself. . . . The moon is a real moon and it is really shining. The river is a real river, it really does glitter and gleam; you can see the ripple and you can almost guess whither, in which direction, the Dnepr is bearing its waters. The shadows and half-shadows, the lights, the air, the faint mist—everything is expressed in such a way that you wonder how paints could express it. . . . Nowhere in the world is there such a painting as this.¹⁴

11. Letter from Repin to I. Ostroukhov, 25 November 1901, in I. Brodsky, ed., *I. Repin. Pisma 1893–1930*, 2 (Moscow, 1969) p. 167. Repin was referring to a copy of the original *Birch Grove*.

12. Rylov, p. 45.

13. Rylov, p. 43.

14. Aleksei Suvorin, quoted in Rylov, p. 43.

Unfortunately, *Night on the Dnepr* today makes little impression on one, since, as Kramskoi predicted, the chemicals used in the paints have caused the painting to darken substantially.¹⁵ To a considerable extent the same is true of most of Kuindzhi's luminist works. Second versions of *Night on the Dnepr* and *Birch Grove* were included in Kuindzhi's second one-man show in 1882, after which he retired from public life, never exhibiting again.

What led to Kuindzhi's sudden retreat is difficult to establish, the more so since he left almost no diaries, correspondence, or notes. Perhaps Kuindzhi was afraid of failure after the success of pictures such as *The Birch Grove*; perhaps he felt that his sudden fame would prove to be an encumbrance; perhaps he wished to devote himself entirely to research and experimentation. He may have also wished to avoid the suspicion and hostility of critics and artists, who had already cast aspersions on his name and had even inspired the rumor that while a shepherd in the Crimea, Kuindzhi had murdered an artist and seized all his paintings.¹⁶

It was not until 1892 that Kuindzhi accepted the

post of professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, taking charge of the landscape studio at the so-called Higher Art School within the Academy in 1894. Kuindzhi was one of the Academy's most popular teachers, and in his studio were artists who were later to become famous: Konstantin Bogaevsky, Aleksandr Borisov, Nikolai Rerikh (Roerich), Arkadii Rylov. Borisov, in particular, proved a worthy successor to Kuindzhi and used the luminist style to good effect in his many scenes of the Arctic regions (Figure 10). Rylov, a foremost landscapist in Soviet times, recalled that Kuindzhi commanded both their affection and respect:

15. Kramskoi wrote to A. Suvorin, 15 September 1880: "The following thought worries me: will that combination of paints which the artist has discovered last for very long? Perhaps (consciously or unconsciously—it does not matter) Kuindzhi put paints together which are organically antagonistic to each other and which will either fade out or change after a certain time, and will disintegrate to the point where our descendants will shrug their shoulders, perplexed." Quoted in S. Goldshtein, ed., *Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi: Pisma stati v dvukh tomakh*, 2 (Moscow, 1966) p. 54.

16. According to N. Rerikh (Roerich) in "Moi vstrechi s Kuindzhi, Purvitom, Bogaevskim, i dr. slavnymi khudozhnikami," *Segodnya* 309 (Riga, 1936) p. 4.

FIGURE 10

In the Land of Eternal Ice, by Aleksandr Borisov. Oil on canvas. State Tretyakov Gallery



On Fridays Kuindzhi's studio was crowded with students: Arkhip Ivanovich would inspect the homework of anyone who wanted his advice. . . . I did not like the familiarity of certain pupils toward their professor: they would interrupt him, interfere in the discussion of my work and sometimes did not agree with Kuindzhi's opinion. At that time I was still a soldier. I found this attitude to the "boss" unusual and disturbing. Later I realized that this was not a boss with his underlings, but a father with his children.¹⁷

Kuindzhi's faith in his students was such that he allowed them to view his "secret" paintings of the preceding decade. He was dismissed from the teaching staff in 1897 for his sympathy with student agitators. The following year he took a group of pupils to Paris and other cities, paying all their expenses.

Although his dismissal deeply affected Kuindzhi, he did not sever his ties with the Academy, but remained a member of its Council and even made the institution a gift of 100,000 rubles in 1904. Such magnanimity, part of Kuindzhi's sincere desire to help students, culminated in his ambitious proposal to organize a benevolent society for artists. Eventually, this led to the establishment of the Kuindzhi Society in St. Petersburg, opened officially in February 1908, to render "both material and moral support to all art societies, groups, and also individual artists; to co-operate with them, to organize exhibitions both in St. Petersburg, other cities and abroad; to provide continuous support by purchasing the best works at them so as to organize a national gallery of art."¹⁸

Suffering from a heart condition, Kuindzhi made his

will in March 1910, leaving all his remaining works and money to the Society. He died in St. Petersburg on 11 July 1910. Tribute was paid to his achievements by a large retrospective of his works in St. Petersburg the following year.

With the dissolution of the Kuindzhi Society in 1930 most of the painter's work made its way to the Russian Museum in Leningrad. Among the paintings Kuindzhi bequeathed to his society was *Red Sunset on the Dnepr*.¹⁹ It contains typical Kuindzhian elements—large dimensions, low horizon, aerial perspective, and, of course, the same dramatic luminous contrasts as in his once better-known *Night on the Dnepr*. The success of the sunset, its gradations of light and refractions, depends very much on the central position of the light source, just as many of Kuindzhi's nocturnal landscapes rely on the presence of a full moon in the center of the canvas. Other luminists of the time tended to "avoid showing the moon itself in their paintings, or, if they do show it, then they do so by enveloping it lightly in transparent clouds."²⁰

Kuindzhi's treatment of light and space was encouraged undoubtedly by his interest and experiments in the chemical ingredients of paints, and by his close friendship with the scientist Dmitrii Mendeleev.²¹ But at the same time, it is tempting to suggest that Kuindzhi possessed a more innate, even national conception of space and light for, as his fellow southerner, the Armenian Georgii Yakulov, would later point out,²² each nation tends to see the sun in a different way and thus to interpret space and light according to distinctive artistic principles. There is no doubt that the Ukraine's

17. Rylov, p. 38.

18. Rylov, p. 141.

19. The Museum purchased it in 1974 from a New York dealer who had bought it at Sotheby Parke-Bernet. It was formerly in the New York collection of Peter Tretyakov. *Red Sunset on the Dnepr* (in Russian, *Krasnyi zakat*—"on the Dnepr" was added by the Metropolitan) was painted between 1905 and 1908, and was owned by the Kuindzhi Society, according to the list of works in Nevedomsky and Repin 1913. Some twenty or thirty works were sold by the society up to 1917; probably *Red Sunset* was one of these. All works that were the property of the society were marked on the reverse with the society's printed label, which included a red K, with space for the handwritten title and two or three signatures of the society's officials. No such label is on the reverse of the Metropolitan's picture, but one may have been removed when the painting was relined. The painting is not signed, but this is not

uncommon for Kuindzhi. *Red Sunset* has been reproduced twice in publications: in Nevedomsky and Repin 1913, between pp. 36 and 37 (in color) and in Nevedomsky 1937 on p. 91. A small study in oils, entitled *Red Sunset*, in the State Russian Museum, Leningrad.

20. A. Matushinsky in the newspaper *Golos*, quoted from Nevedomsky and Repin 1913, p. 62.

21. Kuindzhi, presumably, was therefore familiar with Mendeleev's chemical analyses of color. He also knew the scientist Fedor Petrushevsky and probably read his book *Svet i tsvet sami po sebe i po otnosheniyu k zhivopisi* [*Light and Color as Such and With Regard to Painting*] (St. Petersburg, 1883).

22. G. Yakulov, "Goluboe solntse," *Altisina*, no. 1 (Moscow, 1914) pp. 235–239. Translated as "Le Soleil bleu" in *Notes et Documents édités par la Société des amis de Georges Yakoulou*, no. 3 (Paris, 1972) pp. 15–17.

peculiar weather and atmosphere, its aerial clarity and refractivity, flatness, and vast expanse of sky, occasions a unique perception of light. Unlike the clearly delineated light and space of, for example, large cities or of the intimate English countryside, the light of the Ukrainian steppes is curiously dense and omnipresent. Kuindzhi attempted to transmit this quality, and his *Red Sunset on the Dnepr* becomes a picture of space as much as of a crepuscular landscape. There is no recession of trees or buildings to provide the illusion of perspective and no definite outlines to delineate objects. Moreover, unlike a Realist work, *Red Sunset* makes no overt reference to the world beyond the frame; no gesture, glance, or pointed finger, no arabesque of trees, no crowds of people, no windows link the picture to the viewer's three-dimensional reality. Our attention is focused only on the interchange of color and light that achieves an almost cosmic force, a grand tension between physical and abstract, matter and spirit, "here" and "there."

Although a democrat, Kuindzhi was little concerned with the social or political dimensions of a given scene. He did, however, attempt to use the scene as an emotional and psychological stimulus. In using nature expressively rather than narratively, Kuindzhi imbued his work with a sense of timelessness. Somewhat like his contemporaries, the poets Afanasii Fet and Konstantin Fofanov, Kuindzhi anticipated the highly subjective, dreamlike tendencies of the Russian Symbolist movement of the late 1890s and early 1900s. However, there is no reason to assume that Kuindzhi went so far as to imagine, as did the Symbolists, that art could act as a medium of communication with the "essence" or the "absolute." Like the landscapist Isaak Levitan, Kuindzhi reacted against the Positivist interpretation of reality common to the Realists, and he "abstracted" or "synthesized" the natural world, so that his epic pan-

oramas, devoid of human figures, seem to be the ultimate distillation of nature herself. Even so, Kuindzhi's juxtaposition of such abstraction with his concrete presentation of space and light invests his work, particularly *Red Sunset*, with a peculiar tension that is associated with so many examples of Symbolist art and literature—and which is also especially identifiable with Russian Modernism as a whole.

As one of Kuindzhi's last major works, *Red Sunset on the Dnepr* was a step in movement towards abstraction, just as were Monet's *Haystacks* or Sérusier's *Talisman*. It was this promise of new aesthetic principles that Kuindzhi's biographer identified with *Red Sunset* as early as 1913:

This piece has already presented us with a certain new sensation, it has given us something important. . . . This painting does not gladden the eye, in my opinion, it is not at all "pretty." . . . But a kind of vastness, an elementalness dispersing into infinity, can be felt from the straight, parallel lines of the horizon, the banks of the river, the lower edge of the cloud. . . .²³

While Kuindzhi can lay little claim to universal fame, he deserves to be remembered for two important achievements, both of which are implicit in *Red Sunset on the Dnepr*. On the one hand, it is clear that he stood outside those socio-political conventions of Russian Realism that we have accepted as all-encompassing for too long, and thus he offers us an alternative criterion for our study of nineteenth-century Russian art. On the other hand, Kuindzhi's attention to the intrinsic properties of painting, especially to color, anticipated some of the most exciting trends of twentieth-century Russian art, not least the color experiments of Kandinsky and Matyushin. In this respect, Kramskoi's description of Kuindzhi as "a man of the future"²⁴ is justified.

23. Nevedomsky and Repin 1913, p. 164.

24. Kramskoi in a letter to Repin, 5 April 1875, in Goldshtein, 1, p. 294.