

Alex Y



EXHIBITION OF THE WORKS OF
ALEXANDRE EVGUENIEVITCH IACOVLEFF

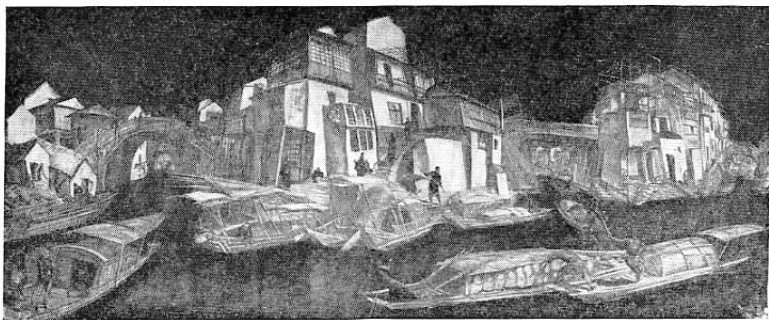
1922

PAINTINGS, WATER COLORS AND DRAWINGS
BY ALEXANDRE EVGUENIEVITCH IACOVLEFF



MANCHU WOMAN

COURTESY OF ARTS AND DECORATION



SOOCHOW (DECORATIVE PANEL)

FOREWORD

IT was in the autumn of 1919, in an empty room of the Russian Consulate in Paris, that I first saw the work of Alexandre Evguenievitch Iacovleff. It was an incident merely in a mad kaleidoscopic rush through eight European countries,—an attempt to gather an International Exhibition of paintings for Carnegie Institute. I had gone to the Russian Embassy to seek the good offices of M. Sazonoff, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in obtaining a part of the Russian Exhibition shown at the Venice International of 1914. It was at the moment when Admiral Kolchak was in full flight and Denikin was making his last stand on the Don. The Russ paintings themselves had been removed from Venice to Rome because of the Austrian air-raids. An important conference was on at the embassy, yet the gracious and kindly diplomat, apparently unhurried, left his harassed colleagues to discuss Russian art and artists with a visitor whose inopportune call was in itself an impertinence. M. Sazonoff spoke with warm admiration of the paintings of Iacovleff which had just arrived from China, and gave me a card to an official at the consulate. I have said that this was but an incident among over eight hundred studio visits, but it was an unforgettable one. To stumble across an individuality so marked,—an unheard and unsung genius,

is a rare and exquisite thrill even to the *entrepreneur* of art. But it would have been caviar to conservative Carnegie. My hope to show the work of Iacovleff languished, therefore, until last year when through the enthusiastic interest of Abram Poole, who was then in Paris, the present exhibition was arranged. ¶ Beginning with Verestchagin who painted the horrors of war and who himself fell a victim to a Japanese shell in the harbor of Port Arthur, America has seen successfully the work of Ilya Repin, romantic realist, the contemporary and friend of Tolstoy, Levitan the landscapist, Borovikovsky and Levitsky, portrait painters, and the narrative and genre painters of the Columbian and Louisiana Purchase Expositions. In the next period came the sensuous stage decorations and costumes of Leon Bakst, the decorative interpretations of Slavic types by Nicolas Fechin, and the decorative landscapes of Leon Gaspard. ¶ Three years ago Doctor Christian Brinton introduced the sumptuous and opulent Anisfeld and last year the sensitive Russo-Byzantine Natalia Goncharova in combination with the more markedly modernistic Larionov. In 1920 Dr. Brinton wrote the catalog and I had the honor of arranging a series of epochal exhibitions by Professor Nicolas Roerich. ¶ A nationalistic character penetrates and colors the work of these later men. The Russian painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been compelled or were content to reflect the passing phases of French and German art with a resultant feeble echo of Watteau, of the Dusseldorf bitumenists or of the brown tonalities of Barbizon. The Russian Academy of Fine Arts had been as rigorous and as rule-bound as our West Point. In the "60's" a group of students who called themselves "The Wanderers" rebelled and sought untrammelled artistic expression. This search has gradually led in our day to the study of the folk-song, the folk-dance, the ancient crafts of "Wooden Russia," the enamels and ikons of Byzantium, culminating in the formation of a group known as the Mir Isskousstva. Many of the members of this group are now resident in Paris, but of these men

without a country Iacovleff stands quite alone. There is nothing to link this original with his country or with his country's art. He was born in cosmopolitan Petrograd. There is also a strain of the Greek in his ancestry and his paintings have something of the simple silhouette treatment of the Attic frescos which Pausanias describes. He himself, bearded and cameo-profiled, might have stepped from the Aegina pediment. There may be something atavistically Hellenic in the severe linear formula, the austerity and lofty serenity which is so markedly characteristic of his work. There is, it is true, in several of his paintings a suggestion of the eighteenth century Somov, notably in that of the hoop-skirted seeress who holds two masks beside her mask-like face. It was, however, a visit to Italy which definitely fixed his technical trend. ¶ Piero dei Franceschi, Melozzo da Forli, Mantegna, Cosimo Tura, the sharp and vivid realism of the Ferrarese, are reflected in his drawings in sanguine and black crayon, in the monochrome modelling of his faces, in his controlled lighting and in his sober and unreflected color. After Italy, Iacovleff journeyed to Spain and spent some time in an intensive study of El Greco. There is, perhaps, another atavistic affinity here. Certainly the Greco-Russ owes to the Iberian-Greek his understanding of overlapping and interrelated rhythms, as witness in his *Seaweed Fishers of Oshima*, and *The Cactus at the Gate*. With the outbreak of the war he returned to Russia but in 1917 he was released from military obligations and in a journey to China realized a dream long-cherished. ¶ It was characteristic of the man that he was not content to put on canvas the obvious and the purely picturesque. Compare his account of a sunrise with that of the good Papa Corot: "I climbed upon the great wall near the hill which is covered by the Chang Men Tower. Hence I can contemplate the city. Northward is the Manchurian town in the still, cold mystery of hardly awakening colors, wherein the purple wall and golden roofs of the palaces appear, while from below, from the Chinese city, slowly ascend the innum-

erable columns of light smoke, which the sunlight pierces and dissipates.....it is the breath of life awakening in contact with the morning. Noises until now subdued become audible and re-echo from spot to spot. I now hear the rattling of the copper dishes belonging to a perambulating barber. The double-edged knife of the grinder throws its strident notes through the quiet air; the porter's cries become a rhythmic plaint—all these sounds form groups or cross and recross one another in the growing light, yellow and blue, presently to assume real shapes by which they tell the prodigious legend of Life sternly fought and opposed by the legend of Death as represented by the imperial, the forbidden city."

❀Iacovleff gave to his two year study in China the same pitiless scrutiny, the same Zolaesque scalpel with which he laid bare the degraded soul of the absinthe drinker of the Cafe de la Rotonde. It was as though he had read in *The Chronicle of Nestor*: "These people are shut in by sky-touching hills, and through the small gate which is their only opening they look out from time to time and speak, but no one understands them." It is an Oriental Comedie Humaine which he has analyzed and synthetically spread before us: A Manchu lady with cheeks rouged in two enormous patches—painted eyebrows on white painted face—her black headdress decorated with an artificial chrysanthemum, a jade hair-pin thrust through at an angle, strides through crowded streets, prideful, inscrutable.....A kneeling lama wears a ceremonial headdress like a Templar's plume..... The melancholy, itinerant food-vender stands stripped to the waist behind his rice-moulds and blue-patterned sauce bowls.....In the background coolies labor in the paddy-fields and irrigate the terraces with primitive bucket-levers.....Spectral Soochow glows in the moonlight.....Her ghostly arched bridges and sampans poled by chanting boatmen appear.....Sympathetic houses huddle together like aged gossips.....a seller of second-hand furniture on a stone khan—his combined bed and table..... musicians.....marionettes.....a No dance.....Bugaku masks

.....a forge.....a Manchu princess with hair like a buffalo's horns.....herds of camels.....Tartar horsemen in full gallop.....a window with dwarf pine trees.....In a Chinese theatre two actors with frightful masks are in furious combat. Presently the actor-acrobat with the saw-toothed sword will be thrown from the second balcony stage to the pit. There will be no applause. The audience weeps instead. The hot-towel man plies his limp trade, the fat-jowled mandarin in black and gold, reeking with sweat, sips his tea.

R. B. H.



SEAWEED FISHERS FROM OSHIMA ISLAND, JAPAN

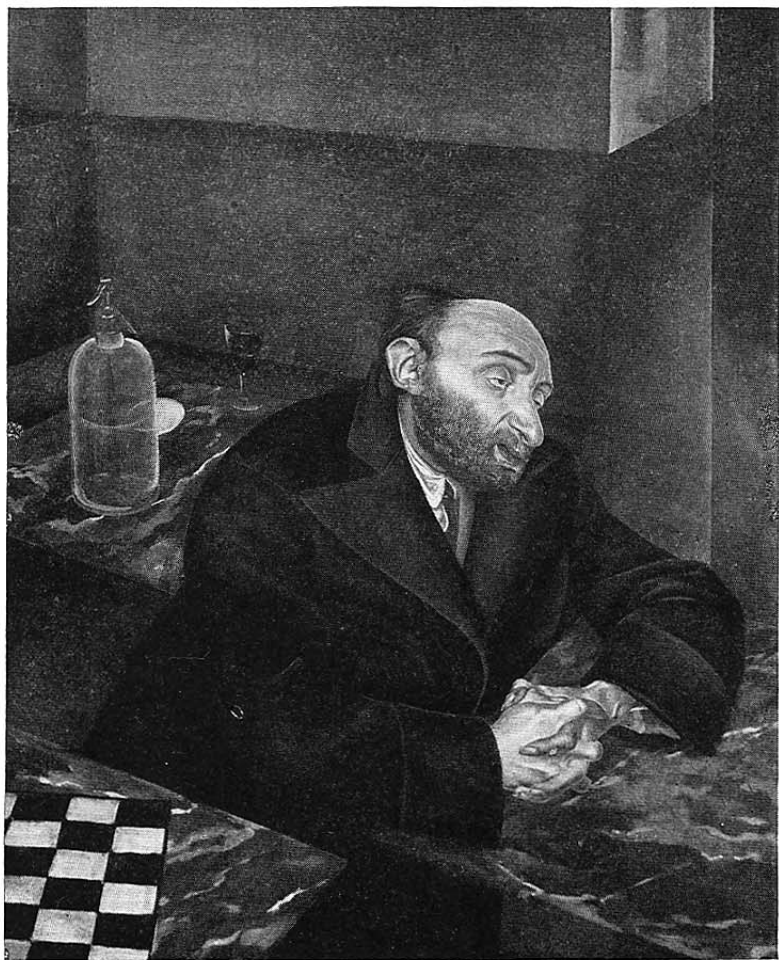
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