Pictorializing the Southern Kuril Islands: The "Shikotan Group" and the Artists of the Russian Far East*

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Introduction

The art of the Russian Far East has so far hardly been the object of broad attention in Japan. *Modernism in the Russian Far East and Japan 1918–1928*, an exhibition held in 2002, would have been the only art-historical survey of the region of our concern where Russian Futurists, such as David Burliuk and Viktor Palmov among others, were working soon after the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. And though, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russo-Japanese friendship exhibitions have occasionally been organized as part of the sister prefecture exchange

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¹ Modernism in the Russian Far East and Japan 1918–1928. Catalog of an exhibition held at Machida City Museum of Graphic Arts, Utsunomiya Museum of Art and Hakodate Museum of Art, Hokkaido, 2002.

program,² our knowledge about its art is still very limited. However, the region is rich enough with artistic production. This is not surprising if we consider the large populations of the central cities like Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and, above all, the solid system of art institutions, including the Union of Artists and art schools, inherited from the Soviet Union. Even more interesting is the fact that so many Russian artists have so far visited the Kuril Islands and depicted their landscapes.

Since the mid-1960s, several artists from Primor'e and Moscow used to go there every year, and they were called the "Shikotan Group (*Shikotanskaia gruppa*)." This group was guided by a Muscovite painter, Oleg Loshakov (1936–), who was at the center of the Soviet art world. Even after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the artists of Vladivostok and Sakhalin remained interested in this borderland. Their attention is mainly turned to the southern part of these islands, which corresponds to what is called the "Northern Territories" of Japan. Since after World War II, this area, composed of three bigger islands, Kunashir (*Kunashiri*), Iturup (*Etorofu*), and Shikotan, and the smaller Khabomai (*Habomai*) Rocks, has

² Art Exhibition with Friendly Nations in East Asia: Liaoning Prov. (China), Primor'e Ter. (Russia), Kangwon Prov. (Korea), Toyama Pref. (Japan) (Toyama: Museum of Modern Art, 1999); Neo Lagoon: Contemporary Art of North East Asia, Niigata Prefectural Civic Center Gallery, 1999 (There is also a post-exhibition version with the display and event documentation); etc.

³ As far as I can see, the literature on this group is very scanty. See Vitalii Kandyba, "Shikotanskaia Gruppa," *Tvorchestvo*, no. 10 (1982), pp. 8–9; idem., *Khudozhniki Primor'ia* (Leningrad, 1990), passim. The latter is available on the web [http://primkray.ru/index.php?a=artfoto&rid=hud_hist&num=7#shikotan] (accessed October 1, 2007). A recently completed doctoral dissertation, which I have not yet had the opportunity to read, Larisa Manych, "Poetika russkoi zhivopisi vtoroi poloviny 1950-kh – 1970-kh godov," Moscow State University, 2007, includes a section entitled "Shikotanskaia gruppa."

⁴ Though rather concise and old, the following is the only monograph on the artist: Aleksandr Morozov, *Oleg Loshakov* (Moscow, 1976). Loshakov was a board member of the Union of Soviet Artists during the 1960s and 1970s, and has been Merited Artist of the Russian Federation since 1982. And he sometimes contributed to the official magazines of art, *Tvorchestvo* and *Iskusstvo*.

been governed by the Soviet Union and later by the Russian Republic.

My concern is not to argue whether the Japanese government's claim to this region is legitimate or not. I would rather like to look into the way in which Russian artists represented this disputed territory. We will find a certain type of landscape painting that contains invariable motifs. The production of innumerable and repetitive landscapes could be explained in a highly political context.⁵ It is probable that the Soviet regime would have resorted to the use of art as a political tool and relied, though in a minimal part, on the effect of representation to claim sovereignty over the islands.

At the end of this paper, I will refer to some other aspects of the "northern" landscapes, because of my belief that it is not always necessary to read only political meanings, such as ruler-subject or owner-owned relationships, into portraits of the land. The boundary regions in question are where the indigenous ethnic groups and the immigrant settlers live together. Here, Russians are represented as being assimilated into this "aboriginal site." And the status of coexistence between different ethnic peoples seems in many ways to bring fruitful results to artistic productions.

Painters of Sakhalin and Vladivostok

It is well known that during the Soviet period, there existed nonofficial trends of artists whose works were accepted by the international contemporary art scene. We often recognize unthinkingly Moscow conceptualism and Sots Art as the main currents in the history of Russian art. And since the '90s, humorous and sometimes even ridiculous art pieces from

⁵ W. T. J. Mitchel, "Imperial Landscape," in idem. ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 5–34, draws our attention to the "ambivalent" and "fractured" character of landscape that cannot be interpreted only from the perspective of "owning." For a survey of landscape seen as an act of "pictorializing," see Gina Crandell, *Nature Pictorialized: "The View" in Landscape History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁶ This region would be perceived by Russians in another way than "northern."

Russia have been always present at art fairs that are held throughout the world. In the Far East, though some hesitant attempts such as the Sots Art-like works of Gennadii Arapov (Khabarovsk, 1956–) [fig. 1] can be found and two exhibitions were organized in Vladivostok by a Belgian artist, Christine Steel, in view of contemporary art [fig. 2],⁷ the mainstream of artistic activities remains oriented to realism. The artists seem to be cut off from the rest of Russia artistically as well as geographically. The studio of Natal'ia Kiriukhina (1955–) shows the general artistic tendencies in the Far East where the traditional subjects such as landscape, portrait, and still life are very popular [fig. 3]. And expressionism is very common as seen in the portraits of a Korean-Russian painter, Dyu Men Su (1948–) [fig. 41.8]

But it is also true that some typical and even attractive characteristics are found in their works. To take an example, Givi Mantkava (1930–2002), a Georgian artist from Tbilisi who lived in Yudzno-Sakhalinsk, represented various aspects of the quotidian life in Sakhalin. *Ice Fishing* (1986) [fig. 5] is a familiar sight in a cold region, and the outdated *Offshore Oil Well Derrick* [fig. 6] reminds us of the tranquility before the influx of foreign capital into Sakhalin. In the *Nivkh Hunters* [fig. 7] painted in 1973, this minority people seem to be pictorialized as an integral part of an officially multiethnic country, or the Soviet Union. Fishery is a major industry in which every painter has been very interested as shown in his *Drying Fish* [fig. 8]. It is needless to say that marine landscapes abound in Sakhalin, which is all surrounded by sea.

Natal'ia Kovalevskaia (1959–) often uses motifs related to the sea and fishery. *The Old Fisherman* [fig. 9], sitting against strung salmon, shows a sunburned red face and horny hands, which are the signs of hard labor over the years. While socialist realism have depicted the working class, farmers, soldiers, and factory workers, looking to the future and full

⁷ Reality against Truth at the Pushkin Theatre in 2003, and Extremities at the Museum of Modern Art Artetage/FENTU in 2006.

⁸ For a brief description of Far Eastern art, see N. Brzhovskaia, "Far Eastern Artists," in V. Semenchik and N. Krapivina, eds., *Sakhalin Regional Art Museum: History and Collection* (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 1998), pp. 33–41; Kandyba, *Khudozhniki Primor'ia*.

of hope, in a bright atmosphere, Kovalevskaia's fisherman keeps his eyes fixed on us as if he is facing up to hard reality. This serious expression derives from what is termed the "Severe Style" (*surovyi stil'*), which dates back to around 1960.⁹ In a more impressive way, Vitalii Drozdov (1939–), Meritorious Artist of Russia working in Khabarovsk, portrays a similar figure who sits between two polarized social classes. This work naturally reflects the realities of Russia today marked by inequality [fig. 10].

The *torii* of the old Tomari Shrine is one of the remains constructed when Sakhalin was under Japanese control. It is curious that Dyo Son Yen (1960–), a Korean-Russian artist and professor at Sakhalin Arts College, depicted this gateway to a Shinto shrine by day and by night [figs. 11, 12]. This act could be defined as an attempt to incorporate in artworks the passage of time, or the history in itself of a place, as well as its geographical and climatological features. Such a case is found in the concrete wharf of Moneron Island, only dozens of kilometers off the Japanese coast, which is a construction of the Japanese period and is inserted in the work of Nadezhda Troegubova (1958–) [fig. 13]. It may be termed a "representation of temporal stratification." How can we put an interpretation on these matters?

The border areas between Russia and Japan, which include the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands, are the home of the northern aboriginal people, the Ainu, Nanai, Nivkhi, and Uilta. On the other hand, Russians and other ethnical groups such as Ukrainians, Georgians, Jews, and Koreans who were left behind in Sakhalin after World War II, are "exotics" understood in their etymological meaning. "Exotics" are persons who come from the outside and live in a state of "exile," or away from their homeland, while Northern people are indigenous, meaning people who were born inside. For the "exotics" of the Far East, mostly Russians, pictorializing these boundary regions, including the nature, climate, scenery, human's daily life, and even the history, would mean assimilating this land into their own. It would be an act of naturalizing themselves into this foreign soil.

⁹ For the development of the Severe Style, see Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 389 ff.

Landscape Paintings of the Southern Kuril Islands and the Shikotan Group

As I mentioned above, the painters of Far Eastern Russia often travel to the most inconvenient places. Moneron Island, for example, is depicted by other artists than Nadezhda Troegubova [fig. 14]. To reach this desert island, one should charter a boat at the west coast of Sakhalin and travel for several hours. They move as if they try to approach the border of the territory to the extent possible. Moreover, the most impressive fact is that so many Russian artists used to visit the Kuril Islands, including the disputed areas to which the Japanese government claims sovereignty.

Givi Mantkava traveled to Kunashir Island at least twice. He depicted a summer landscape with a green mountain in 1985 [fig. 15] and another with a snow-covered mountain in 2000 [fig. 16]. Dyo Son Yen's paintings portray not only Kunashir with swimming dolphins in the Sea of Okhotsk [fig. 17], but Shikotan Island whose hard climate is characteristically represented by the horizontally extending branches of dead trees [fig. 18]. A gouache series by Ivan Yarysh (1937–), carried out around 1990, shows visionary Kuril landscapes in one of which we can see an apparition above the crater of a volcano [fig. 19]. This painter was afforded facilities to travel by airplane through the help of an acquaintance at the airport. In this way, almost every artist of Sakhalin seems to have visited the Kuril Islands for all the difficulties regarding the transfer.

In 1997, the Sakhalin branch of the Russian Artists Union and the Sakhalin State Art Museum organized an exhibition that commemorated the three-hundredth anniversary of Vladimir Atlasov's exploration to the Kuril Islands [fig. 20]. Many artists, besides those I have already listed above, participated in this exhibition.¹¹ They are mostly from Sakhalin but we can find some other artists from Vladivostok and Moscow. It is

¹⁰ From an interview with the artist on October 14, 2001.

¹¹ *300-letiiu osvoeniia Kuril*. Brochure an exhibition held at the Sakhalin State Museum, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 1997.

remarkable that such a vivid interest in the remotest land was not limited only to the people of Sakhalin. Among these artists, Oleg Loshakov (1936–), a Muscovite, is the most important public figure.

It should be noted that since 1966 until 1991, Loshakov organized the travel and bringing of the artists of Vladivostok and surrounding areas to the Kuril Islands almost every year [figs. 21, 22]. 12 I have never had sufficient opportunity to survey this "Shikotan group," but some Vladivostok members testify that artists joined the group by turns and they were up to about fifteen people at one time. 13 To cite an instance, Alexander Pyrkov (1946–), a leading artist of Vladivostok, went to Shikotan only few times. Some participated more often, but not every year as Loshakov did. So the total number of artists would amount to around fifty or a little bit more in twenty-six years without counting the same people multiple times. ¹⁴ They staved for a period in a barracks dormitory on Shikotan Island, cooking for themselves. From Vladivostok, it was at least a four- or five-day trip in a boat by way of Korsakov, the southern port of Sakhalin. The artists traveled at their own expense, according to the affirmation of the artists, but in return, they could exhibit their works in Moscow. It should be considered significant that Oleg Loshakov, leader of the group, was near the center of power in the capital city. 15 The activities of the Shikotan Group seem to have remained unknown to Japanese people. It would be funny to imagine so many Soviet artists being intent on painting landscapes behind the iron curtain

¹² From interview with Oleg Loshakov on June 2, 2007. He visited Shikotan Island twenty-three times in these twenty-six years, and each time for two or three months in summer.

¹³ From interviews with Yurii Volkov on October 31, 2003, and Alexander Pyrkov on July 1, 2006.

¹⁴ cf. note 12.

¹⁵ Oleg Loshakov asserts that it was not without much effort that they could find exhibition spaces in different occasions (cf. note 12). His most recent one person exhibitions were at the Moscow Union of Artists Exhibition Hall on Kuznetskii most (2002) and at the Russian Academy of Art on Prechistenka Street, Moscow (2006). The former was dedicated to his activities in Shikotan and entitled *Oleg Loshakov — Moi Ostrov Shikotan*.

Loshakov's Girls of Malokurilskoe [fig. 23] is a telling example that reveals the mission of the Shikotan Group. 16 The girl on the right is staring slightly upward and looking into the distance and behind her, a fishery factory can be seen along the bay. Representing Soviet people and an industrial view is a common way of socialist realist painting. Here, eliminating any sign of indigenous aspects and stressing European characteristics in the female figures, this scenery seems to successfully disguise itself as an ordinary Russian or Soviet landscape and thus not diverse from other places of the country. However, it is worth pointing out two distinctive motifs in this painting. They are the peculiar appearance of the double volcano and the wide curve of the bay. In this way, Mt. Tyatya in Kunashir and the Bay of Malokurilskoe in Shikotan have turned out to be insignia of the southern Kuril Islands, and every artist followed this formula. Loshakov himself repeated these motifs [figs. 24, 25]. And many others of the group such as Iurii Volkov (1941–) [fig. 26] and the artists of Sakhalin, as mentioned above (Givi Mantkava, Dyo Son Yen), did the same thing [figs. 16, 17]. The poster of the 1982 Shikotan Group Exhibition held in Moscow typically shows a design inspired by the double summit of Mt. Tyatya [fig. 27].¹⁷

Though it is true that these artists were attracted by the wild nature of the sparsely populated area and aimed to depict the macrocosm in monumental scale as Vitalii Kandyba once asserted, ¹⁸ I would like to emphasize the political structure of landscape painting that is woven into their seemingly quite common artworks.

Pictorializing a foreign land in one's own manner would mean possessing it or at least claiming its property as is illustrated, to cite an example, in the works of Frans Post. This seventeenth-century Dutch painter

¹⁶ Prof. Nobuo Arai kindly suggested to me that there is a temporal coincidence between the group's activities and the construction campaign of the biggest fish factory complex on Shikotan.

¹⁷ The poster and the exhibition catalog with introduction by Olg Loshakov were printed a few years before, respectively, in 1979 and 1980. *Khudozhniki na Kurilakh* (without place and date, but Moscow, 1980).

¹⁸ Vitalii Kandyba, "Shikotanskaia Gruppa."

traveled to Brazil and after returning home, continued to draw pictures always with exotic motifs over years until his death.¹⁹ Most of his paintings, though including Brazilian animals and plants, can be compared to the contemporary Dutch landscape paintings [fig. 28]. Frans Post saw the New Continent through colonist eyes and transformed it into a part of his homeland. The same could be said for the landscapes of the southern Kuril Islands.

The choice of two landmarks, volcano and bay, reminds us of a popular destination preferred by travelers of the Grand Tour. Among Russian artists who worked in Italy, Aleksandr Ivanov (1806–1858) executed an impressive view of the bay of Naples against Mt. Vesuvio [fig. 29]. This work is at once a topographical and idealized representation of a place where people live their life in an idyllic way. Loshakov's works such as *The First Day of Autumn* [fig. 24] and *A View of the Fishery Factory in Malokurilskoe, Shikotan* [fig. 22] look like a new Arcadia or a peaceful haven of refuge. In this way, he succeeded in creating a new typical Russian landscape as did such painters as Isaak Levitan and Arkhip Kuindzhi in the second half of the nineteenth century [figs. 30, 31]. ²¹

These landscape paintings evoke a strong feeling of nostalgia for the country. If it is the case with the typified images of the southern Kuril Islands, it can be said that they were also politically successful. Nostalgia for terra incognita is a contradiction in terms. But arousing this feeling in the audience, the works of the Shikotan Group could serve to integrate the

¹⁹ León Krempel, ed., *Frans Post, 1612–1680: Maler des Verlorenen Paradieses*. Catalog of an exhibition held at Haus der Kunst München (Petersberg, 2006); Pedro Corrêa do Lago and Bia Corrêa do Lago, *Frans Post, 1612–1680: catalogue raisonné* (Milan; 5 Continents, 2007), pp. 256–257.

²⁰ Grigorij Goldovskij, Engenija Petrova, and Claudio Poppi, eds., *La pittura russa nell'età romantica* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1990), esp. pp. 54–66. An exhibition catalog.

²¹ For the role of painting in the formation of the "Russian" landscape in the nineteenth century, see Tetsuo Mochizuki and Kayo Fukuma, "How Many Pictures Does "Roman" Contain?: Vladimir Sorokin and Russian Landscape" in this volume.

disputed territory into the Soviet Union.²²

Epilogue: Representation of Coexistence

Though the political nature of landscape paintings should be stressed especially in our case, I would like to draw attention to the part that may be excluded by such a univocal reading. For example, Fishermen's Boss [fig. 32] depicted by Sergei Gorbachev (1952–) of Vladivostok in 1986 shows an elderly man with the bay and hills in the background. He was, to be sure, an immigrant from Russia or a settler in the land of the indigenous people, but seems to have already become a naturalized inhabitant of Shikotan. And after the generation change, sons of immigrants become "indigenous," or native to this place.

During the Cold War, Japanese artists not being permitted to cross the border seem to have lost interest in the multiethnicity of the region, and represented the landscape of Hokkaido merely as a northern view of Japan. On the other hand, the Ainu people, almost all of whom have settled in Hokkaido, have manufactured many kinds of craftwork with exotic patterns. It is as if they restricted their activities to ethnic productions.

Russian artists such as Gennadii Arapov of Khabarovsk try to introduce Nanai motifs in his works [fig. 33]. Here, it is possible to read what I would like to define as a "representation of coexistence." This timid attempt may not be so successful because it seems no more than a simple appropriation. But we can hope that the "representation of coexistence" or multiethnicity, though in an obsolete form of landscape painting, can raise the quality of art pieces to a universal level. It is the coexistence between ruling European people and indigenous northern people in the multiethnic (at least officially) state of Russia, which is contrasted with the racially homogeneous (supposedly) nation of Japan.

From the perspective of indigenous artists, it is not adhering excessively to ethnic traditions that their works can avoid being too exotic and

²² Further investigation is needed to see whether concrete political support was offered for the activities of the group. Oleg Loshakov suggests that in some occasions young artists could get a grant for traveling expenses from the Komsomol (as note 12).

can thus be regarded as art pieces in a universal sense.²³ Bikky Sunazawa (1931–1989) would have been one of few Ainu artists whose works have reached this level [fig. 34]. It is interesting to note that he made many ethnic craft objects to earn a living, while creating objects of art without expecting much.²⁴ Anatoly Donkan (1955–), who prefers to be described more as "an artist" than "a Nanai artist," tans fish skin into leather for his works [fig. 35]. He has left his homeland to live in Austria and then move to Germany. This could be an example of artists who, utilizing traditional technique and design, produce art works of universal value. It seems important that this "indigenous" artist, who was born in the "inside" of his land, creates universal art, moving far away from home and becoming "exotic" who has arrived outside.

²³ Though it would seem out of date to speak of universal value or quality in art, I would like to argue in view of world literature analysis some other time. For the implication of "universality," see, for example, David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 135 ff.

²⁴ For Bikky Sunazawa, I owe much to Akihisa Tanimoto and Mikiya Taniguchi, *What should we learn from the works of Bikky Sunazawa?* published by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C)(1), Hokkaido University of Education at Iwamizawa, 2005, pp. 13–24 [in Japanese].

Illustrations and Captions

Many of the paintings' titles are those tentatively given by the artists or the author of this article. Information about the artworks is not fully described if not confirmed by recent research.

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- **fig. 29** Aleksandr Ivanov, *A View of Naples from the Road of Posillipo*, ca.1843–1848, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Grigorij Goldovskij, Engenija Petrova, and Claudio Poppi, eds., *La pittura russa nell'età romantica* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1990), p. 61. An exhibition catalog.

- fig. 30 Isaak Levitan, *Eternal Peace*, 1894, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. A. Dmitrenko, E. Kuznetsova, O. Petrova, N. Fedorova, *Fifty Russian Artists* (Moscow, 2000), p. 170.
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fig. 1 Gennadii Arapov, Export Russia



fig. 2 The Exhibition "Extremeties," Museum of Modern Art Artetage/ FENTU, 2006



fig. 3 Natal'ia Kiriukhina's Studio in Yudzno-Sakhalinsk



fig. 4 Dyu Men Su's Studio in Yudzno-Sakhalinsk



fig. 5 Givi Mantkava, Ice Fishing, 1986



fig. 6 Givi Mantkava, Offshore Oil Well Derrick



fig. 7 Givi Mantkava, *The Nivkhi Archers* 1973, Sakhalin Regional Art Museum



fig. 8 Givi Mantkava, Drying Fish



fig. 9 Natal'ia Kovalevskaia Old Fisherman, 1996



fig. 10 Vitalii Drozdov, Old Musician



fig. 11 Dyo Son Yen, Torii at an Old Shinto Shrine,Tomari



fig. 12 Dyo Son Yen, Torii at an Old Shinto Shrine, Tomari



fig. 13 Nadezhda Troegubova *The Bay*, 1997



fig. 14 Natal'ia Kovalevskaia Moneron Island



fig. 15 Givi Mantkava Kunashir Island, 1985



fig. 16 Givi Mantkava Kunashir Island, 2000



fig. 17 Dyo Son Yen, Sea of Okhotsk



fig. 18 Dyo Son Yen, Shikotan Island



fig. 19 Ivan Yarysh, Kuril Series, ca.1990



fig. 20 Exhibition brochure, 300th Anniversary of Discovery of the Kurils, 1997



fig. 21 Oleg Loshakov, To the Kurils, 1973-1974



fig. 22 Oleg Loshakov, A View of the Fishery Factory in Malokurilskoe, Shikotan, 1988



fig. 23 Oleg Loshakov Girls of Malokurilskoe, 1970, Artists' Union of Russia



fig. 24 Oleg Loshakov, The First Day of Autumn, 1981



fig. 25 Oleg Loshakov, A View of the Kuril Islands, 1981



fig. 26 Yurii Volkov, The Artist in Shikotan, 1997



fig. 28 Frans Post, Ruins of the Olinda Cathedral, 1660s, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart



fig. 30 Isaak Levitan, *Eternal Peace*, 1894, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



fig. 27 Exhibition poster, Artists on the Kurils, 1982 (printed in 1979)



fig. 29 Aleksandr Ivanov, A View of Naples from the Road of Posillipo, ca.1843–1848, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



fig. 31 Arkhip Kuindzhi, Morning on the Dnieper, 1881, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



fig. 32 Sergei Gorbachev, Fishermen's Boss, 1988



fig. 33 Gennadii Arapov, Rock Drawings of Nanai, Far Eastern Museum, Khabarovsk



fig. 34 Bikky Sunazawa, *Four Winds*, Sapporo Art Park Outdoor Museum, 1986



fig. 35 Anatoly Donkan, Fish Skin Craftwork