

Aivazovsky

Painter of the Sea

17 March – 10 July 2011

Bank Austria Kunstforum, Vienna

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Facts & Figures

Curators: Ingrid Brugger, Lisa Kreil

Exhibition organisation: Barbara Gilly

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Tickets: Bank Austria Kunstforum
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Austria Ticket Online (www.ato.at)
Österreich Ticket (www.oeticket.at)

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	Concessions	7.50 euros
	Senior citizens	7.– euros
	Art Start Card (17 to 27 years of age)	6.– euros
	Young people up to 16 years of age	4.– euros
	Family Ticket	20.– euros
	Groups (as of 10 persons)	7.50 euros
	Children up to 6 years of age	free
	Personal Art Assistant, public guided tour	3.50 euros

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Press text

Aivazovsky – Painter of the Sea

The Bank Austria Kunstforum is showing the breathtaking work of Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky (1817–1900) for the very first time outside Russia and the Ukraine: internationally acclaimed during his lifetime with exhibitions in Saint Petersburg, Paris and London, Aivazovsky's name is hardly known in Central and West Europe. The exhibition has the aim of presenting this extraordinary artist to a wide-based public.

The impressive oeuvre of the »Russian Turner« – as Ingrid Brugger aptly calls Aivazovsky – is dedicated to a single, central motif: the sea. The artist transforms the liquid element into glassy surfaces of water reflecting sun and moon, tumultuous spume and thrashing waves. His paintings are imbued throughout with the spirit of Romanticism, showing shipwrecks, battles, marine manoeuvres, yet also tranquil coastlines. The special quality of his seascapes might be termed cinematographic today and it certainly astounded his contemporaries. During an exhibition in Paris in 1842, visitors reputedly even looked for light sources behind the pictures. Aivazovsky is a painter of epochal turning points: particularly his late work engages in the aesthetics of dissolution in Symbolism and anticipates features of Impressionism.

After his studies in Saint Petersburg and extensive journeys throughout Europe, Aivazovsky returned in the late 1840s to the intoxicating »golden light« of his home city Feodosia in the Crimea. This light mood is typical of the artist and can be seen for example in his major work *The Ninth Wave* of 1850, in which Aivazovsky dramatically interweaves a catastrophe scenario with a shimmer of hope: shipwrecked figures are adrift on wreckage in the open sea; the ninth and most perilous wave is about to break, yet the warm tones of the sky convey hope.

Views of historical military events at sea testify to the artist's duties as official painter appointed to the Navy; but they also demonstrate his mastery in painterly skill, which

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goes far beyond the conventional depiction of an actual happening. Aivazovsky blends water, fire and air on his canvases to generate incomparable atmospheric power, justifiably bringing William Turner to mind. The two artists met in Rome in 1842; Turner was overwhelmed by Aivazovsky's picture *View of the Bay of Naples by Moonlight*, which is also on show in the exhibition. He described his Russian colleague as »inspired by genius«.

In the 1880s Aivazovsky began to concentrate primarily on the depiction of pure water and wave movement. Aivazovsky himself regarded his painting *The Billow* of 1889 – next to *The Ninth Wave* the key major work in the exhibition – as the most successful among his many pictures of storms at sea. The ship is about to sink; but here it plays no more than a subordinate role and underlines the elemental power of the elements: the horizon is flushed away in drastic gesture, the sky and sea become one, the beholder has the feeling of literally drowning in the picture.

The main loans for the exhibition have come from the State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg; it has sent practically its entire holdings of Aivazovsky to Vienna for the exhibition. Other loans for this ambitious project have been sent by the Peterhof Museum and the Central Naval Museum in Saint Petersburg, the Aivazovsky Gallery in Feodosia, the Museum of Russian Art Kiev, and the San Lazzaro Monastery in Venice. Many of the superlative paintings shown in the exhibition are leaving their home museums for the very first time for the show.

Information

Foreword to the Exhibition Catalogue

One of the programmatic focuses in our exhibition agenda – Modernist painting and its past history in the art of around 1900 – has predestined the Bank Austria Kunstforum to hold this retrospective of Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, the »Russian Turner«, as I would most aptly like to call him. The exhibition is the first comprehensive retrospective devoted to the artist outside Russia and the Ukraine and underscores as well the longstanding and diverse relations of our institution to our partners in Saint Petersburg, Kiev and elsewhere; their continent of art still holds what are – at least for us – undiscovered treasures hidden in many of its peaks of achievement.

Aivazovsky was the child of Armenian immigrants and born in the small port of Feodosia on the Crimean peninsula. His art was part of the official Russia of the time: Aivazovsky was highly esteemed in his country in more ways than one: as a painter, of course, whose fascination and reputation reached far beyond the confines of his nation even during his lifetime, as manifest in the number of his commissions, but also as a teacher. His retreat, his idyll, however, was his home town of Feodosia. Here, in the provincial town on the Black Sea, in his feudal estate with view onto the sea, Aivazovsky spent most of his life. His studio-cum-house was already one of the main attractions of the town during his lifetime and now holds a museum devoted to the artist.

The exhibition has a winning trump to play in that it unites the major works from Russia with those from the Ukraine and thus provides a comprehensive view of one of the most extraordinary artists born of the Romantic and Late Romantic movement. Aivazovsky is a household name in Russia, the Ukraine and the neighbouring Eastern countries; he is part of their general cultural heritage, one of the most illustrious painters of the late nineteenth century, whose works attract the highest prices among his clientele at international auctions. In great demand and highly esteemed among our neighbours, he is hardly known in Central and West Europe apart from a coterie of art historians and dealers. Our exhibition will change this situation, of this I am convinced. The sensation not

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only for the eye but also for the knowledge and understanding of art offered by Aivazovsky's works cannot be confined by national boundaries. His pictures defy anyone to escape their power.

Aivazovsky was born in 1817, thus he was more than a generation younger than William Turner, his idol and to a certain degree his artistic mentor. After his studies, Aivazovsky won a scholarship from the Saint Petersburg Academy and in 1840 embarked on a journey through Italy, Spain and France; he met Turner, now advanced in years, in Rome in 1842. It was one of Turner's last sojourns abroad; Aivazovsky, however, was just at the start of a remarkably promising career. The master described a night view of the Bay of Naples shown to him by his colleague as »inspired by genius«, an assessment we can understand: the two painters were united not only by their romantic experience of nature; both of them, Turner and Aivazovsky, were just as much children of their time as artists as they were ahead of their time. This applies above all to their late work, but not only. Like Turner's works from his »classic« period, Aivazovsky's pictures of the 1830s and 1840s anticipate the visionary late work that o'erleaps the bounds of the century. In fact, his early work and, at the latest, the canvases he painted as of the late 1840s already testify to his primary interest in the painterly aspects. Overt reasons for painting pictures increasingly take second place to his desire to recreate different qualities of light. Sky and sea, sudden sunlight breaking through the clouds, transfiguring moonlight, tumultuous storms and thunder and lightning – moods and atmospheres, therefore, develop into the painter's main interest. Of course, like any topographer Aivazovsky wanted to make his pictorial motifs recognisable; but he also endeavoured – like any Romantic painter – to create stories and situations in his pictures that excite the emotional potential in the beholder. The atmospheric blurring of the motifs and their dissolution into light moods not only correspond to the aesthetics of dissolution in Symbolism, but above all take up features of advanced Impressionism, namely, in his late work, where his painting style evolves an autonomy of its own as oscillating tapestries of colour. It is as striking as it is significant that in most of his commissioned works Aivazovsky tends to waive the painterly freedom he seeks in his »autonomous« pictures. His commissioned works, mainly depictions of fleet squadrons, manoeuvres and major sea battles, frequently manifest him as a painstakingly detailed reproductive artist. What George Stubbs was for

the popular genre of horse pictures in eighteenth-century England , Aivazovsky was in his own time for nautical themes: their leading portraitist.

Nevertheless, in such history pictures as the grandiose *Battle of Sinop* of 1853 from the Saint Petersburg Central Naval Museum Aivazovsky isn't simply illustrating an historical event. It is as if the painter's hand has run away with him: in the dramatic interaction of incandescent light and the darkness foreboding disaster the motifs recede from all naturalistic viewpoints. In such pictures, Aivazovsky dispenses with materiality; the battling hulks of the ships flare up and fuse into the elements. His simultaneous accentuation, indeed hypertrophy, of contrasts in light and shade secures for Aivazovsky his modern imagery of symbol and sign.

In his late major works like *The Billow* of 1889 from the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, the sinking ship appears in the centre of the bottom third of the picture, along with the lifeboat struggling in the waves and the figures clinging to the wreckage, puny in comparison with the overpowering, storm-ridden seascape, but no less significant than this. The pictorial narrative is sparked off by these »small« details. The wide expanse of space evoked by the gigantic waves and the spraying foam underlines the might and sublimity of the elements, the puniness of man confronted by the overwhelming power of nature. We just have to subtract and screen out the motifs to find ourselves standing before a twentieth-century picture, in end effect before an almost abstract image, its conceptual signals evoking associations of water, of waves and light. But that's our fancy, not that of the artist: Aivazovsky is a painter of the late nineteenth century, but he operates with overpowering and extraordinary means.

Aivazovsky's life lies on the pivot of an epochal turning point. The new scientific discoveries – the invention of electricity, the radiolucent quality of material, the exploration of the subconscious mind – designate the knowledgeable contemporary as a doubter. It is as such that the artist asserts his right to mistrust the sense of sight with his painting and to focus instead on the perception of the inner eye.

The exhibition concentrates on Aivazovsky's main themes, on the sea in all its moods and levels of meaning and man's imperilled attempts to conquer it. This breathtaking

panorama is augmented by examples of veduta painting and mythological motifs: these paintings, too, are dominated by a boundary-breaking treatment of motifs and of the very act of painting, which magnifies the beholder's experience in well-nigh indecorous visual emotional excitation.

Had Aivazovsky lived and worked in France, England or elsewhere in the so-called western hemisphere, he would today doubtlessly be one of the most famous artists of his era on the international scene. Our exhibition aims to do justice to the artistic rank due without any doubt to Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, and to be a spur to art historians to review the literature of the past centuries within a wider context.

These aspects also convinced the loaning institutes of the project's importance. The Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg has sent practically its entire, superlative Aivazovsky collection to Vienna, including the spectacularly huge canvases of the permanent show collection; they were first seen by the writer of this foreword many years ago, and their inspirational effect on her was nothing less than mind-blowing. My heartfelt thanks go to the colleagues from the Russian Museum, Vladimir Gusev and above all Evgenia Petrova. My thanks furthermore go to the Peterhof Collections, to Elena Kalnitskaya, and also the Saint Petersburg Central Naval Museum, to Andrey Lyalin, for their generous support. Likewise, I wish to express my warmest thanks to the Museum of Russian Art in Kiev, here Yury Vakulenko, and the Art Museum in Odessa and Nataliya Polischuk; also to the aforementioned Aivazovsky Gallery in Feodosia and its director Tatyana Gaiduk. Aivazovsky continues to be one of the main attractions of the town in Crimea, which is today becoming more and more of a tourist magnet. Thus thanks are due all the more for the generosity with which the museum has bequeathed major works as loans to this exhibition. The Monastery of San Lazzaro in Venice, where Aivazovsky's brother lived as an Armenian religious, has also loaned us important works. I wish to thank Abbot Elia Kilaghbian there, and Abbot Paulus Kodjanian of the Mechitarist Monastery in Vienna for his help. Furthermore, let me express my gratitude to all the relevant political and diplomatic entities in Austria, the Ukraine and in Russia for their support and commitment.

My heartfelt thanks go as well to Lisa Kreil, the curator of the exhibition and co-editor of this volume, to the entire team of the Bank Austria Kunstforum, and to all catalogue authors.

This exhibition has enabled the Bank Austria Kunstforum to become associated with new and generous sponsors and partners. My warmest thanks are due to the Signa Holding, above all René Benko; their commitment went far beyond the support of this single project and has set the course for a positive future for our institutions. I am particularly grateful to the Kunstforum partners: UniCredit Leasing, ERGO, Schöllerbank, Pioneer Investments and Visa card complete. I look forward with great pleasure to our partnership. I also thank the exhibition partners austria.com, Fly Niki, Hilton and our media partners Austrian Television ORF Wien and Radio Ö1.

Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky would have packed this last paragraph in a heaven-storming, light-flooded wave...

Ingried Brugger, Director, Bank Austria Kunstforum

Biography

1817

Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky was born as a child of Armenian merchants on 27 July in the small port city of Feodosia in Crimea.

1833

Aivazovsky is awarded a scholarship and arrives in Saint Petersburg in August, where he starts to study painting at the Imperial Academy. The landscape painter Maxim Vorobiev is his teacher.

1835

Aivazovsky's first official picture *Study of Air over the Sea* is presented at an Academy exhibition in Saint Petersburg and awarded the silver medal.

1836

Meets Alexander Pushkin, friendship with Karl Briullov.

1840

Aivazovsky embarks on his first trip to Italy in late August, visiting Rome, Venice, Bologna, Florence and Naples.

1842

Becomes acquainted with William Turner in Rome; astounded by the realism in Aivazovsky's pictures, Turner describes a night view of the Bay of Naples as »inspired by genius«. In the same year Aivazovsky travels to England and Holland and prepares an exhibition for the Louvre in Paris, which is a great success.

1844

Aivazovsky returns to Saint Petersburg, where he becomes a member of the Academy and is appointed official painter to the Navy.

1845

First journey to Constantinople. The artist is utterly fascinated by the city and writes: »
There can be no more majestic city in the whole world than this. Forget Naples and
Venice!«

1847

The artist returns to his home city of Feodosia to build a house-cum-studio by the sea.
Although just thirty years of age, he is the richest man in town. He doesn't only invest his
power and money as an end in itself, but supports various projects, including a railway
connection and an archaeological museum.

1853

Aivazovsky marries Julia Graves, a Scot, and has four daughters with her, but the marriage
is unhappy. The Crimean War starts in the same year.

1857

When the Crimean War is over, Aivazovsky travels to Paris and organises a very successful
exhibition with 25 pictures.

1865

Aivazovsky fulfils a long cherished wish, joins forces with his brother Gavril, who belongs
to a religious order, and opens an art school in Feodosia.

1868

Long journey through the Caucasus; the artist is fascinated by the wild landscape and the
spartan way of life of its population.

1872

Exhibitions in Nice and Florence. Professors of the Academy in Florence commission
Aivazovsky to paint a self-portrait. The picture is now in the Uffizi.

1880

The Aivazovsky Gallery is opened. Aivazovsky had the first private gallery in the Russian provinces built after his own plans.

1882

Aivazovsky marries Anna Nikitichna Sarkisovaya. The 1880s period is a highly productive and creative phase; between 1880 and 1888, his pictures are shown in more than thirty solo exhibitions.

1892

Aivazovsky and his wife embark on a trip to America and visit New York and Washington; he is particularly impressed by the Niagara Falls.

1900

Aivazovsky's last exhibition in his lifetime is held in Saint Petersburg. He dies on 2 May in his studio while working on his last painting *Exploding Ship*, which remains unfinished. The artist is buried next to the old Armenian church of Saint Sarkis not far from the house of his birth in Feodosia.

Information

Quotations

»The movements of living nature cannot be registered with the brush. This is why the painter has to retain everything in his memory.« (Ivan Aivazovsky)

»So noble, powerful is the art that only genius could inspire!« (William Turner on Ivan Aivazovsky, 1842)

»There is still another world to discover – and more than just one! Philosophers, onto the ships! « (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft [The Gay Science]*, 1882)

»Does not a ship hovering between heaven and earth open up far-flung spheres of thought! Everything here lends the mind wings and movement and the spacious circulation of the air! The flapping sails, the tossing ship, the tumultuous power of the waves, the flying cloud, the far-reaching, infinite circulation of the air!« (Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769*, 1769 [*Journal of my Travels*])

»If you have become accustomed to the sea for a longer period, you cannot imagine how you could live without having seen it and how you can go on living without seeing it.« (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1787)

»The water of the sea is in no way becalmed by transparency. It has nothing to do with the seductive nymphs of the springs and the bright fountains. Sea water is dense and heavy; it hits hard. If you venture into it, you feel the power bearing you upwards. It might indeed help the swimmer, but it has mastery over him; he feels like a weak child in the cradle of a strong hand, which is just as able to break him.« (Jules Michelet, *The Sea*, 1861)

»The sea! The sea makes me sad despite its fascination. In a joyous mood it reminds me of a laughing tiger. In a sad mood it evokes crocodile tears and in its tumultuous rage it is a monster which is kept in a cage and cannot swallow me.« (Gustave Courbet in a letter to Victor Hugo, 1864)

»My soul, like to a ship in a black storm, is driven, I know not wither.« (John Webster, *White Devil*, 1610)

»If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.« (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Citadelle*, 1946)

Information

The Exhibition Catalogue



Ingried Brugger and Lisa Kreil (Editors.),
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essays by Hartmut Böhme, Tatyana Gaiduk, Lisa
Kreil, Ivan Samarin and Florian Steininger. 168
pages, approx. 90 illustrations, 29.- euros.

The exhibition catalogue is the first monograph in
German on the work of Ivan Konstantinovich
Aivazovsky. A selection of his most outstanding

seascapes provides a comprehensive view into Aivazovsky's oeuvre; the catalogue
contextualises the marine painter's highly romantic work, establishing links to European
Romanticism and Dutch marine painting. It also updates various aspects, including the
considerations of art-historical literature on shipwreck as a metaphor in art, and the
reflection of neo-Romantic trends in contemporary painting and photography.

In his introductory essay, Hartmut Böhme, theorist and scholar of cultural studies at the
Humboldt University Berlin, analyses traditions and forms of aquatic aesthetics in
Aivazovsky's work. In her text *Shiffbruch erleiden* (Being Shipwrecked), Lisa Kreil, co-
curator of the exhibition in the Bank Austria Kunstforum, traces the horizon of meaning in
shipwreck as a metaphor ranging from the early seventeenth century to modern art. Ivan
Samarine, editor of an English-language monograph of Aivazovsky, focuses his essay on
the status of the artist in the nineteenth century: Aivazovsky commands the light
scenarios of his canvases like a film director. Florian Steininger, curator in the Bank Austria
Kunstforum, draws parallels in his text to the Romantic trends in contemporary art –
examples taken from the works of Elger Esser, Gerhard Richter and so forth prove the

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existence of a yearning for mystical motifs and subjects even in the present flood of media images. In her final biographical outline, Tatyana Gaiduk, director of the Aivazovsky Gallery in Feodosia, provides an overview of Aivazovsky's life and work.