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BETWEEN ILLUSTRATION AND ICON: THE WORKS BY MIKHAIL VRUBEL *

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У статті порушено питання кореляції між словом та зображенням у художніх роботах Михайла Врубеля, натхненних творами художньої літератури.

Ключові слова: Михайло Врубель, збірна конструкція, візантійський вплив, мистецтво Російської імперії, текст, зображення, символізм, нові романтики.

Статья посвящена вопросу корреляции между словом и изображением в живописных произведениях Михаила Врубеля, навеянных художественной литературой.

Ключевые слова: Михаил Врубель, собирательная конструкция, византийское влияние, искусство Российской империи, текст, изображение, символизм, новые романтики.

The article is dedicated to the word-image correlation in Mikhail Vrubel's works suggested with literature.

Keywords: Mikhail Vrubel, Composite Structure, Byzantine influence, Art of the Russian Empire, text, image, Symbolism, New Romantics.

The works by M. Vrubel and his tragic life are surrounded with a demonic and mystic aura; insanity, malediction and prophecy are woven through the studies and exhibitions of this artist and his works. Though, nowadays Vrubel is a very famous artist, most research on him is biographical one and tends to connect Vrubel's paintings with his mental issues. A close examination of research on Vrubel and his works shows that many studies follow the *tormented artist* myth.

Another trend usually found in studies on Vrubel is an attempt to find a meta-narrative that would unify the majority of the artist's works and intertwine it with his biography. This attempt was inspired by Russian symbolist writers and poets who identified Vrubel as one of their own group, and were the first to recognize him as a significant artist. The problem with this approach is that there is little evidence in his works or writings to justify such claims. Many scholars have tried to uncover the philosophical foundation behind Vrubel's works; however, a lack of actual proof regarding his philosophical knowledge complicates the research. Another theme of Vrubel's work that researchers usually study is his use of novel graphic language and the inspiration behind it.

This research is dedicated to the word-image relationship in Vrubel's works inspired by

literature. Vrubel's frequent reference to literature is well documented; furthermore, Vrubel was obsessed with some literary themes that inspired him. Vrubel's *Demons*, suggested by Lermontov's poem, is the most known example of it. My main idea is that these paintings function as symbolic interpretations of the texts and not as illustrations. This relation was affected greatly by Vrubel's comprehension of Byzantine art. The paper is based on scholarly sources in the fields of art history, literature, culture studies and history.

The connection between the paintings and the literary narratives behind them in Vrubel's oeuvre has never been closely examined. Vrubel scholars hold that the artist chose to depict literary characters that were not only well known but who evolved into famous philosophical-allegorical symbols. These scientists also claimed that most of these paintings fail to illustrate the text and that their association with the narratives was limited to the titles.

The article by N. Tamruchi is an exception as she claims that Vrubel's works inspired by literature is a corpus to be studied separately [18]. She argued that Vrubel had chosen canonical literary characters symbolizing various events of his own life which he saw as a literary text. Therefore, although Tamruchi studied Vrubel's literature-inspired works,

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she didn't examine them connected with the texts but focused on their symbolic overtones. P. Suzdalev [17] and A. Pyman [32] referred to Vrubel's literature-inspired works as a whole, but they focused on the Demon motif. Though their insights are extremely important for my study, they did not develop a theory regarding the method Vrubel used while referring to a literary text.

As it was mentioned earlier, literary themes pervaded Vrubel's paintings throughout his creative life. For example, the drawing *Anna Karenina: Rendezvous with Son* is an accurate illustration of the scene in Tolstoi's novel, in which Anna sneaks into her son's bedroom. This work was probably painted when Vrubel started his studies in the Academy of Arts in 1880 in Saint-Petersburg. However, in *Hamlet and Ophelia* painted in 1883 one can see another approach. It is a watercolor sketch for a later version made in oils in 1884 (fig. 1). In it Hamlet and Ophelia are depicted against an abstract background. The work isn't an illustration of a scene from Shakespeare's play, and it seems that the connection with the text is achieved only by Vrubel's title.

In the watercolor version of 1883 Hamlet is sitting in an elaborately decorated chair. His face, which is in fact Vrubel's self-portrait, is turned towards the viewer and his gaze is frontally focused. He is dressed in a historical garment in grey-brown colors with a beret on his head. In his right hand Hamlet holds a wooden board and there is a writing tool in his left hand. Hamlet's chair overlays the larger part of the picture's surface. Ophelia stands behind Hamlet's chair and leans on it, while her gaze is turned towards the viewer. As the background is abstract one can't tell where the figures are situated. In the oil version of 1884 (fig. 1) Vrubel made significant changes. He painted it in darker colors and placed the figures in a room. There hangs a big and blurry mirror with a magnificent frame on Hamlet's left. Beneath it is a chest of drawers with a marble sculpture of a woman supporting an old man who is leaning on her. To the right of the mirror one can see a passage to another room.

In the version of 1884 (fig. 1) Hamlet's face is that of V. Serov. In both works Hamlet wears

a beret. On the one hand, it is an item of clothing suggesting the historical time; on the other hand, following Rembrandt's self-portraits, the beret came to be associated with painters. The fact that Hamlet holds a board and a writing tool and that his face was executed according to the appearance of two painters, reinforces Hamlet's identification as a painter.

This link between Hamlet and the image of a painter is unique in Hamlet's iconography. A. Young studied the iconographic tradition of illustrations to Hamlet in 1709–1900. He found that during this period 1425 illustrations for Hamlet were produced in various techniques and media [37, p. 11]. In some of the cases the paintings depicted either scenes from concrete theatre productions, or portraits of the actors in their roles [37, p. 39], but mainly they were painters' imagination of the scenes read. A case in point is E. Delacroix's series [37, p. 52]. In the majority of cases painters chose the main scenes from the play such as Hamlet's meeting the ghost of his father, Ophelia's drowning and Hamlet's death. Occasionally, Hamlet's figure came to be identified with Christ [37, p. 52].

Vrubel's two versions of Hamlet had various interpretations. For example, Isdebsky-Pritchard viewed the paintings as Vrubel's philosophical statements [28, p. 65] while Tamruchi interpreted them as Vrubel's identification with the Prince of Denmark [18, p. 96–97]. Neither Tamruchi nor Isdebsky-Pritchard analyzed the picture in relation to Shakespeare's play but argued that Vrubel had chosen Hamlet as a symbol of a wandering philosopher.

Unlike these scholars I think that this painting is a turning point in Vrubel's literature-inspired work as it doesn't merely illustrate [22] ¹ the text but interprets it. The artist develops his interpretation collecting several different scenes from the text and reconstructing a single image from them. In order to understand literary references of a painting the viewer ought to disassemble the events and put them back in the original narrative order. Thus, although the painting doesn't illustrate the text it is essentially connected with it. I suggest to name this new model of reference as a Composite Model ².

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In order to understand the painting in relation to the text the viewer must locate the disassembled details and put them back in the correct order. As a result, the time necessary to interpret the picture is extended. The difference between literature as an art of time and the visual arts as an art of a single moment is one of the known differences between literature (poetry) and visual art.

G. E. Lessing described it in his *Laocoon*. He suggested the visual artist should choose a moment which will make the viewer contemplate and think repeatedly about a painting or a sculpture. Lessing called this a *fruitful moment* [29, p. 14]. Vrubel is known to have read *Laocoon* in 1876 [3, p. 65] and apparently he adopted Lessing's suggestion. Vrubel combined various scenes into one picture and thus extended the moment, instead of depicting the preceding one to the topmost scene as Lessing suggested.

Vrubel scholars were right, of course, when they claimed that in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* wasn't a painter. But *Hamlet* was portrayed as a writer and thus can be perceived as an artist. For example, *Hamlet* wrote down his revenge motto in the book he carried with him after he met his father's ghost:

My tables. Meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be
villain –
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark
[Writes].

So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word.
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me'.
I have sworn 't' [35, p. 222].

Later *Hamlet* is presented as a writer when Polonius informed the King and the Queen about the love letters *Hamlet* had written to Ophelia. In one of the letters *Hamlet* even elaborated the matter of style [35, p. 242]. The most important scene that presented *Hamlet* as an artist and specifically as a playwright and a theatre director might be called the episode where *Hamlet* added the scene of the King's assassination to the play produced by traveling comedians.

«Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor

do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently...» [35, p. 287].

The action of writing also appears in the play when *Hamlet* composes a letter to Horace and tells his friend about his journey and again in another letter he informs the king that he is coming back to Denmark. *Hamlet*'s writing even saved his life when he learned about the King's plan to kill him. *Hamlet* had switched that letter for another one in which he condemned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death.

In two versions of *Hamlet* Vrubel didn't portray any specific scene from the text but synthesized episodes describing *Hamlet* as a writer and made a portrait of an artist. In such a way, *Hamlet*'s character functioned as a composite character. Vrubel's decision to depict *Hamlet* as an artist emphasized the *Ars-Poetica* components of the play. Vrubel adjusted *Hamlet*'s art to his own medium: *Hamlet* was no longer a playwright in a play, but a painter in a painting.

This *Ars-Poetica* complements one of the metaphors found in the play: the art as a mirror of reality. *Hamlet* explained it when he instructed one of the actors:

For anything so o'erdone is from the
purpose of playing,
whose end, both at the first and now, was
and is to
hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature'
[35, p. 288]

Hamlet mentioned the mirror again when he confronted his mother Queen Gertrude:

You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you
[35, p. 319].

In the paintings being discussed the mirror obtained a unique interpretation. In the early version of 1883 Vrubel painted a self-portrait and the mirror acquires the same meaning as in any self-portrait. Vrubel's fixed gaze reminded many scholars of the look of a person observing herself in a mirror [18, p. 97]. In the version of 1884 Vrubel added a mirror placing it behind the figures. The mirror was a popular symbol of contemplation in Romantic poetry in the 19th century. The connection between the mirror and contemplation can be observed in the Latin word *reflectere* that

combines both reflection and contemplation. This double meaning remained in many European languages. Thus, it turns out that in the two Hamlet's paintings Vrubel focused on the Ars-Poetica component of Shakespeare's play. He translated the metaphor of arts as a mirror of reality to painting by portraying an artist with a mirror. Therefore, although the paintings do not portray any scene from the text they act as a visualization of the text's main metaphors.

S. Ringbom demonstrated that a similar process of combining various texts into a single image occurred in the *Andachtsbild* paintings [34, p. 57], in the Netherlands and Venice of the 15th century [34, p. 105]. These religious works didn't represent any concrete moments from the Holy Scriptures but combined different texts into a single image. The purpose of these paintings was to educate the viewer. They were mainly used at home for religious education and meditation [34, p. 84]. S. Ringbom explained these complex pictorial symbols as conceptual illustrations that formed an intermediate stage between a static-symbolic painting and a narrative one [34, p. 57].

I decided not to use the term *Andachtsbild* as it refers to religious paintings with stylistic and iconographic features which appeared in a certain period. Ringbom's research demonstrates that in the past there existed a frame of reference to a text similar to Vrubel's approach. It is interesting to note that the *Andachtsbild* paintings as well as Vrubel's literature-inspired works appeared at a turning point in the text-image relationship. In the 15th century there was a transfer from symbolic-static paintings to illustrative ones. In Vrubel's case it appeared at a point when the visual arts sought emancipation from the text.

Vrubel continued to use this complex approach in his mature literature-inspired works that became even more complicated after the period when the artist learnt Byzantine art. While an affinity between the two has not been thoroughly researched scholars generally agree that Vrubel's mature style was influenced by Byzantine art. I follow up on these claims when I argue that Vrubel adopted various elements from the Byzantine mosaics such as disassembling the object, light, and

shadow effects and flattening the picture's space. In addition, the Byzantine art that visually interpreted religious texts, supplied Vrubel with a reduced and symbolic frame of reference to a text in general. He used this method later for his literature-inspired works. Thus, I believe Byzantine art influenced both Vrubel's thought and style.

By the end of the 19th century the interest in Byzantine art was just in its beginning in the Russian Empire [23, p. 38; 27, p. 4–5]. One of the first experts to acknowledge its beauty and importance was the art historian A. Prakhov. In addition to his research, Prakhov organized different restoration projects in Byzantine churches. One of them included preservation and restoration of the St. Cyril's Church in Kyiv, which exemplifies an artistic synthesis between Byzantine and Old Kyivan Rus art [15, p. 4]. In 1884, Prakhov invited Vrubel, who was a 4th year student of the Academy of Arts at the time, to paint its iconostasis [3, p. 172]. Vrubel moved to Kyiv to start the project and eventually became the head of the restoration team [3, p. 174]. During this period he learned concepts of Byzantine art both from Prakhov and by examining Byzantine mosaics and frescos in the Sophia Cathedral and St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery [3, p. 174]. In 1885 Vrubel traveled to Venice in order to study its Byzantine monuments. Eventually Vrubel became one of the few artists who was familiar with and understood Byzantine art.

Initially, Prakhov intended to restore the original 12th century's frescos in St. Cyril's Church [15, p. 5]; however, he discovered that some of the frescos were completely destroyed. To replace them Prakhov commissioned painters, including Vrubel, to create new compositions [3, p. 174]. An examination of Vrubel's works in St. Cyril's Church reveals the use and combination of components from Byzantine icons, frescos and mosaics – those elements which Vrubel learned from Prakhov's reproductions. S. Yaremich, M. Prakhov, V. Zummer and I. Marholina looked for possible Byzantine antecedents of Vrubel's works. For example, a possible source of the composition *Angels with Labara* is the composition *the Archangel Gabriel* in St. George's Church in Kurbinovo,

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Macedonia [11, p. 30]³. I agree with Marholina since the similarity can be seen in the composition of an angel near the arch, the dynamism of the figure, and the angel's stretched out arm. Vrubel maybe also have taken the green and blue background from there. Examination of these sources indicates that Prakhov strictly followed the 12th century compositions, since they were chronologically similar to the original frescos in St. Cyril's Church. It is important to note that during the 12th century artists started to emphasize Christ's human nature and consequently reflected emotions in their works [31, p. 173].

The first work Vrubel executed in Kyiv was the restoration of the main cupola in St. Sophia's Cathedral. Vrubel was commissioned to paint in oil three of the missing archangels around Christ Pantocrator's figure [11, p. 22–23]. In order to imitate the mosaic, Vrubel drew the figures in plain colors. After the paint dried, he executed a net of small squares over it [3, p. 178]. This experience came together with the painting technique Vrubel learned from his teacher P. Chystiakov. Chystiakov had taught his students to paint an object by breaking it to its basic geometrical components and integrating them into a whole at the end of the work process [1, p. 53]. In addition, Vrubel applied the picture in the impasto manner: very short brushstrokes with thick and undiluted paint. In the composition *The Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles* in St. Cyril's Church Vrubel applied his impasto brushstroke technique again and imitated the glow of mosaic in the apostles' gowns, halos and floor. This is unusual, since even though this composition is a fresco, Vrubel imitated a mosaic's glow.

This experience affected Vrubel as can be seen in the collage⁴ *Oriental Tale* and in the *Demon Seated* (fig. 2). In addition, the fact that he painted a grid over the image suggests the possibility of breaking the object into its basic components. This fragmentation of an object and the use of a mosaic-like glow became the hallmark of Vrubel's style. Another important feature associated with Vrubel's style was his unique color palette of blues and purples. In my opinion Vrubel's color scheme was also influenced by the colors of Byzantine mosaics

that he had seen in St. Sophia's Cathedral [5, p. 67; 30, p. 17–18].

One of Vrubel's most surprising works is the *Moses* fresco (fig. 3). Moses is depicted as a young and beardless man with long hair, the image deviating from the iconographic tradition of presenting Moses as an old man. Isdebski-Prichard claimed that Vrubel had created a new iconographic type [28, p. 70]. Zummer, on the other hand, believed that unusual representation was inspired by another iconographically unique fresco depicting Moses located in the Saviors Church on Nereditsa in Novhorod [11, p. 30]⁵. One can find other similarities between the two in the position of the right arm over the chest, the left hand holding a script and the style of writing using similar ornaments. Another important detail is the small hat on Moses' head that appears in both images. The scholar Revell-Neher identified this kind of object as transformation of the Jewish tefillin worn by certain figures of the Old Testament and symbolizing spiritual leadership [33, p. 58, 67].

Some scholars claim that Vrubel's Moses is closely related to the iconography of the face of Vrubel's Demon – his most famous subject. Whether Vrubel has already conceived his image of the Demon or whether he has not, there is little doubt that a long, geometrical and ascetic face with high forehead, big eyes and thick frowning eyebrows has become Vrubel's favorite face type.

As it was mentioned earlier, the language of Byzantine art had a profound effect on Vrubel's style, and his modern artistic language was based on it too. The drawings which Vrubel made for the decoration of St. Volodymyr Cathedral are a good example of this influence. In four sketches for the *Lamentation* mural, the figures of the Madonna and Jesus are flat and lack volume. Only their faces and the Madonna's hands are realistically painted.

Most scholars accept the following order of the sketches [28, p. 78–79; 4, p. 47]: the first sketch depicts the recognizable landscape of the Golgotha with the crosses. In other versions of the scene, the background is more abstract and is constructed from geometric forms. The flat color patches in those works invoke the mosaic glow and combine the picture's

planes in a flat and modern way *while minimizing volume* [28, p. 79]. An even more dramatic turn towards the abstract art can be seen in the sketch *Head of an Angel*. Vrubel achieved abstraction in his works by applying color in patches and a multiplicity of decorative forms.

In the *Lamentation* sketches, one can see another important aspect that Vrubel adopted from Byzantine art: the reduction of the narrative to its main subject. This is evident in *Lamentation* where the narrative is reduced to Maria's sorrow. Byzantine icons aren't necessarily intended to depict the narrative of the Bible but to convey a certain religious message. The same is true for many of Vrubel's literary works. This is especially important due to the fact that at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century artists were concerned with the emancipation of visual art from text. In the last version of the *Lamentation* (fig. 4) Vrubel enlarged the composition by turning it to a triptych, where each figure is framed by a rectangle. Thus, although the composition includes six figures, each is autonomous and painted on a different plane⁶. The same method can be observed in his *Resurrection* sketches.

The sketches for St. Volodymyr Cathedral show how Vrubel has combined the Byzantine formal language of icons and mosaics with modernist interests. He thus developed his own unique style that inclined towards decorativeness, the unification of the background and the object, the disassembling of the object to distinct geometric forms, and the distortion of the narrative unity. As it was shown earlier, one of the characteristics of Vrubel's art is its glowing effect. In Byzantium the sparkling and glowing of mosaics symbolized God's miraculous incarnation [24, pp. 2, 12]. It may be the visual resemblance between Vrubel's works and the Byzantine mosaics that caused many to feel a mystic experience while looking at Vrubel's works. I find it extremely important to acknowledge these claims and ask why Vrubel's paintings affect people in that way⁷. In order to answer this question, it is important to understand how Byzantine art and orthodox icons has been perceived in Russian Empire.

Throughout the Middle Ages the purpose of the Christian icon and its existence were

highly debated. During the 8th and the 9th centuries these debates led to wars between supporters of the icon, who claimed that a painted subject was just as holy as a written one, and their opponents, who viewed the icon as idolatry [5, p. 53; 21, p. 61]. After the supporters' victory, it was asserted that an icon has a central role in conveying the Christian message, as an icon was both timeless and serves as a present testimony to past events. The orthodox icon is the only form of western religious art where the painted works are equal in significance to the written ones. D. Likhachev postulated that such an attitude towards the icon affected the Byzantine painter who was often a well-read erudite and combined information from various written sources in his murals and miniatures. It was not only the painting but also the literary tradition that formed the basis to the portraits of saints, princes and kings, ancient philosophers, and figures from the Old and the New Testament [10, p. 23]. It is interesting to note that the Greek verb «graphé» has two meanings: to write and to paint [26, p. 229]. The same is true for the old Slavonic and modern Russian, as exemplified by the verb *pisat'*.

In addition to an icon serving as graphical testimony, it is also a channel of communication between the believer and the painted figure [9, p. 9]. The art historian A. Lidov claims that throughout the Middle Ages the icon was not perceived as a flat painting but rather as a space that invites the viewer to contemplate and to move from the materialistic world to the world of ideas [9, p. 9]. In the orthodox culture, the cult of miraculous icons was widely spread, as an icon was (and still is) perceived both as a concrete object and a channel to the other world [9, p. 19]. This makes an icon both an iconic and a symbolic sign. It's important to note that these complex meanings of icons persisted throughout the 19th century.

V. Lepakhin showed that icons were extremely important for many 19th century writers such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Hohol, Leskov, Polevoi, Tolstoi, and others [6, pp. 180, 187]. For example, in the article dedicated to Russian icons, N. Leskov wrote that an icon created by an educated man is equal and may be more important than the text [8, p. 180]. In Pole-

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voi's novel *The painter* the main character feels that he can express the world of ideas only by painting it [14]. Lidov calls this kind of perception *the Russian iconic mind* [9, p. 32–33].

It is well documented that Vrubel looked for a way to express the world in the most accurate way, but avoided the realistic style because he was sure it described only the materiality of the object [3, p. 55, 58–59]. The Byzantine formal language offered Vrubel a form that was simultaneously understood by the public as iconic and symbolic one.

Scholars usually agree that Vrubel did not participate in artistic movements. On the one hand, it is true; on the other hand, during the years of his work in Kyiv, he became closely acquainted with a literary circle of writers and poets who shared similar artistic interests and gathered around the writer I. Yasynskiy [13, p. 166]. Members of this circle called themselves New Romanticists. The poet N. Minskyi and the writers V. Harshyn and V. Bibikov were among them. Though Russian symbolists erased this circle from their genealogy, today many scholars recognize it as one of the main predecessors of Russian Symbolism [13, p. 174]. Generally speaking, the *New Romanticists* praised the idea of art's autonomy and augmented the symbolic component of art work [13, p. 167]. Although among visual artists, Vrubel's interest in symbolic language was unique, it was very similar to the literary thoughts and ideas of the *New Romanticists*. Without asserting who influenced whom, one can say that Vrubel's interest in art's symbolic goal found supporters among writers and poets of the time. While in Kyiv, Vrubel learned a symbolic art form and found supporters who cultivated it.

We can conclude that Byzantine art influenced both Vrubel's style and thought through its attitude towards the art object as a mediator between the materialistic and the ideal world. Vrubel learned to disassemble an object from mosaics and to produce a flatness and decorativeness that caused his paintings to be almost abstract. Thus, it offered Vrubel a language that was different from the academic-realistic art taught in the Russian Empire at the time. In addition, Byzantine art offered him a symbolic frame of reference to

a text, in an age when Western art tried to release itself from the subordination to the text. It also enabled him to depict symbolic reality in a way acceptable for his audience.

Many of Vrubel's mature works inspired by literary pieces share similarities with Byzantine mosaics and icons. At the same time they refer to the text via the Composite Model. This is what we see in his paintings *Pan, the Demon Seated* (fig. 2), *Flying Demon, the Demon Prostrate, Swan Princess, Six-winged Seraphim* (fig. 5) and *Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel*. In some cases Vrubel did not only combine specific scenes from the same text but used various texts on the same subject as the sources. For example, in the painting *the Demon Seated* (fig. 2) Vrubel didn't depict any concrete scene from Lermontov's poem *The Demon*; however the figure of the seated Demon had appeared in Lermontov's various writings. The figure of the seated Demon was mentioned in Lermontov's poem *My Demon* in 1830–1831 for the first time:

«Меж листьев желтых, облетевших, / Стоит его недвижимый трон; / На нем, среди ветров онемевших, / Сидит уныл и мрачен он...» [7, v. 1, p. 76].

A very similar description appears in the sixth version of the *Demon* in which the Demon is described sitting silently and gloomily alone on an icy mountain between the sky and the earth: «Как часто на вершине льдистой, / Один меж небом и землей, / Под кровом радуги огнистой / Сидел он мрачный и немой...» [7, v. 2, p. 510].

I agree with Suzdalev who claims that Vrubel combined these lines with the poem *My Demon* and based his composition on both of them [17, p. 61].

Vrubel used the same approach in the depiction of the Demon's tears⁸: «И, чудо! Из померших глаз / Слеза тяжелая катится... / Понине возле кельи той / Насквозь прожженный виден камень / слезою жаркою, как пламень, / Нечеловеческой слезой!..» [7, v. 2, p. 382]. Although Lermontov wrote at least eight different versions of the *Demon*, the line describing the Demon's tears remained the same one in all of them [7, v. 2, pp. 445–518, 529]. Vrubel most likely had known at least some of these versions as they were

published quite often [7, v. 2, pp. 529–530]. The *tear*, which became the Demon's attribute, corresponded well with Vrubel's interpretation of the Demon as a suffering soul [3, p. 195]. Vrubel painted this solitary tear in some of his later sketches for the *Demon Prostrate*.

In this work, as well as in other pictures of the Demon, Vrubel's formal language owes much to Byzantine mosaics. As earlier, Vrubel broke the objects into small squares. In some cases he added metal and varnish in order to increase the glimmering effect. The dominant colors in the Demon pictures are different shades of blue and deep purple. They symbolize the twilight and are similar to the color palette of the mosaics in St. Sophia Church in Kyiv. Behind the Demon Vrubel painted the summit of the mountain Kazbek resembling a giant crystal flower⁹. The combination of the twilight with the Caucasus made the demonic chronotope [2, p. 235]. In the later paintings *Flying Demon* and the *Demon Prostrate* we find the same chronotope. Thus, the *Demon Seated* (fig. 2) became an exposition to the trilogy. Many viewers, including Vrubel himself, even described it as the depiction of the demonic experience and not of the Demon himself [3, p. 55–56].

The similarity to the Byzantine language in the Demon pictures, suggested to the viewers in the Russian Empire that these paintings should be read symbolically. Most of the scholars agree that Vrubel's Demon symbolizes the rebellious individual in accordance with the Romantic tradition persisted in the Russian Empire as it was evolved in the 19th century. The visual resemblance to mosaics suggests that not only the figure of the Demon should be read symbolically, but the whole formal language symbolizes the rebel. It is interesting to note that Vrubel himself wanted to call his *Demon Prostrate* an Icon [3, p. 149], a desire that has never been fulfilled because his relatives perceived this *blasphemy* as a symptom of his illness.

The interconnection between the holy and the demonic is even more apparent in his late work the *Six-winged Seraphim* (fig. 5) that was painted after Pushkin's poem *The Prophet*. One can see the connection between the Demon and the Seraphim in the similar color

palette of the background composed of various shades of blue, purple and gold. The short and thick brushstrokes remind us again of the mosaic glitter. A grey androgynous figure of the Seraphim with big eyes and a black mane of hair brings to mind the Demon's figure.

There is a controversy among scholars as to whether the Seraphim symbolizes the Demon's redemption or if it is his antithesis [32, p. 352]. To my mind it is impossible to decide which of the interpretations is correct, as they are both feasible despite contradicting each other. The visual connection between Vrubel's Demon and Seraphim cause a heteroglossic [20, p. 205] connection between the two works. The two simultaneously possible interpretations turn the two paintings into complicated signs that are impossible to decipher. The resistance to definition becomes a perfect interpretation of Lermontov's description of the Demon: «Он был похож на вечер ясный: / Ни день, ни ночь, – ни мрак, ни свет!...» [7, т. 2, p. 424]. The combination of the two characters appeared not only in Vrubel's paintings but also in fin-de-siècle literature of the Russian Empire, for example, in N. Minskyi poem *My Demon* [12, p. 134].

To sum up, as opposed to the believed earlier, I claim that Vrubel's paintings inspired by literature are closely connected with the source texts. They are created with the artist's interpretation of the text style, its metaphors and symbolic subjects. Vrubel achieved this connection either by bringing together various elements of one text or different texts on the same subject. I called this frame of reference a Composite Model. Vrubel's comprehension of the Byzantine formal language and its symbolic overtones enabled him to develop a model in which the painted subject is compatible with the written one. In addition, the language perceived in the Russian Empire as a vehicle of symbolic messages enabled Vrubel to treat symbolic subjects in a symbolic way. The study of Vrubel's literature-inspired pictures reveals emergence of an old-new alliance in the text-image relationship in a period when the visual art in the Russian Empire moved from the narrative painting of the 19th century to the avant-garde art of the 20th century.

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Endnotes

¹ In his essay *The Photographic Massage* Roland Barthes defined illustration as an elucidation of the principal message of the text.

² I coined this term basing it on the term Composite Character employed in Russian literature research. For example: [16].

³ Yaremych and Mykola Prakhov claimed that the composition *Angels with Labara* was inspired by the angels of the mosaic of the *Last Judgment* in Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello. There is a chronological inconsistency in this statement as Vrubel visited Torcello after he had completed work in St. Cyril's church. Moreover, this comparison is visually less convincing [19, p. 54; 3, p. 177].

⁴ In several cases Vrubel added small pieces of paper to painted compositions. He created the first collages in such a way.

⁵ Unfortunately I couldn't locate Zummer's work so here and after I quote via Marholina's paper.

⁶ This approach preceded Picasso's *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon* where the author omitted the narrative.

⁷ Norman Bryson posed a similar question about the viewers' common reactions to Watteau's paintings [25, p. 72–73].

⁸ Lermontov uses the singular form of the word – tear – in the original text.

⁹ On the interplay between denotations and connotations in Vrubel's works see [36].

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LILIYA DASHEVSKI. BETWEEN ILLUSTRATION AND ICON...



Fig. 1. Hamlet and Ophelia. 1884. Oil on canvas.
St Petersburg: State Russian Museum



Fig. 2. Demon Seated. 1890. Oil on canvas. Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery

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Fig. 3. Head of the Prophet Moses. 1885. Oil on plaster. Kiev: St. Cyril Church, National Zapovednik "Sophia Kiev". Western wall of the choir loft



Fig. 5. Six-Winged Seraphim. 1904. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum



Fig. 4. The Lamentation. Watercolor and graphite pencil on paper. Kiev: Museum of Russian Art. Sketch for a Mural for St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kiev

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SUMMARY

The given research is dedicated to the word-image relationship in M. Vrubel works inspired by literature. The paper's main idea is that these paintings are mainly symbolic interpretations of the texts and not illustrations to them. The artist developed his interpretation collecting several different scenes from the texts to create a single image. In order to understand the literary references of the paintings the viewer ought to disassemble the events and put them back to the original narrative order. Thus, although Vrubel's paintings aren't the illustrations to the texts they are essentially connected them. This new model of reference is identified in the paper as a Composite Model. Such approach was affected greatly by Vrubel's comprehension of Byzantine art and his acquaintance with the *New Romantists* – a literary circle of writers and poets who gathered around the writer Ieronim Yasynskyi. The study of Vrubel's literature-inspired pictures reveals emergence of the text-image relationship in a period when visual art has moved from the narrative painting of the 19th century to the avant-garde art of the 20th century.

Keywords: Mikhail Vrubel, Composite Structure, Byzantine influence, Art of the Russian Empire, text, image, Symbolism, New Romantists.

РЕЗЮМЕ

У статті порушено питання кореляції між словом і зображенням у художніх полотнах Михайла Врубеля, натхненних творами художньої літератури. Багато з робіт Врубеля є символічними інтерпретаціями текстів, а не ілюстраціями до них. Митець обирає кілька епізодів з певного літературного твору й, комбінуючи їх, створював образ. Аби збагнути літературні референції, глядач має розібрати створений образ на окремі елементи й повернути їм оригінальну сюжетну послідовність. Тому хоча роботи Врубеля не є ілюстраціями, вони все ж таки глибоко пов'язані з літературними творами. Для визначення співвідношення між текстом і зображенням авторка статті запропонувала термін «збірна конструкція». Такий підхід сформувався у Врубеля під впливом двох факторів, а саме: осмислення ним візантійського і давньоруського мистецтва та знайомства з діяльністю київського літературного гуртка «Нові романтики», зосередженого довкола Ієроніма Ясинського. Вивчаючи художній доробок Врубеля за мотивами літературних творів, доходимо висновку про існування специфічного союзу між словом і зображенням, характерного для періоду між сюжетним мистецтвом ХІХ ст. та авангардним мистецтвом ХХ ст.

Ключові слова: Михайло Врубель, збірна конструкція, візантійський вплив, мистецтво Російської імперії, текст, зображення, символізм, нові романтики.