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The Image of Christ. 19th century imagination of the sacred in Russia and the West

I would like to introduce a chapter from my PhD theses (in progress) entitled *The Image of Christ. 19th Century Imagination of the Sacred in Russia and the West*. The chapter concerns the work of Russian painter Aleksandr Ivanov (1806-1858), whose two major paintings (*Noli me tangere* and *The Appearance of Christ before the People*) and a series of watercolor sketches introduce an attempt to create a sort of synthesis of religion and art and intend to express the essence of christianity through the visual representation. Alongside with this aim Ivanov's works pretend to set up the Russian school of painting within another “national” schools of the 19th century. My aim is to show how the Russian painter approaches to sacred themes and how he develops artistic program of his works.

Aleksandr Ivanov was born in St Petersburg as a son of painter Andrei Ivanov. He also received the first artistic experience from his father. As an associated student he continued to study at the St Petersburg Academy of Arts. By receiving the gold medal for the painting *Joseph interprets dreams in prison* (1827) he obtained the several years lasting scholarship. He was sent to Rome where he spent 28 years working mostly on his huge canvas *The appearance of Christ before the people*. Ivanov dedicated most of his time in Italy to the execution of two large canvases - *Noli me tangere* and *The Appearance of Christ before the people*, and from 1840' onwards to the series of watercolor sketches on various religious subjects. Although were both paintings executed consequently (*Noli me tangere* 1834-35, *Appearance* 1834 onwards) were both works intended in the same. It seems to be necessary to deal with both paintings in a close relation.

As another european masters settled in Rome also Ivanov studied broad spectrum of italian art from Giotto to Guercino and Domenichino. The Russian painter wasn't nevertheless interested in taking over from old masters neither the compositional schemas nor figures or physiognomy but rather more universal features like color (Titian) or general impression (Leonardo). Apart from the old masters was Ivanov also deeply interested in the work of his contemporaries. Namely Friedrich Overbeck (and partially other Nazarenes) represented for

him the ideal of a true christian, almost monk-like artist. Overbeck also helped Ivanov to better formulate the subject of his large canvas *The Appearance of Christ before the people*. Ivanov's intention inspired perhaps by Overbeck's *Entry of Christ to the Jerusalem* was to create a work which would be able to demonstrate the essence of the gospel. Ivanov therefore chose John 1:19 (The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!") as a point of departure. According to Ivanov it was exactly this verse from the gospel which bears substance of New Testament. Ivanov tried to communicate the biblical event in order to evoke a "warm feeling" (teploe chuvstvo) of faith in the soul of the viewer, or more precisely to create a painting that would assist contemporary man in his spiritual, ethical and religious awakening through an aesthetic contemplation of a work of art. This was also, according to Ivanov, the original meaning of religious painting.