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JAMES WHISTLER AND ANNA OSTROUMOVA-LEBEDEVA IN PARIS, 1899: THE STORY OF AN ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

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Some relatively unknown aspects of history and art on the turn of XIX–XX century as well as creative connection between James Abbot McNeil Whistler and A. P. Ostroumova-Lebedeva has been analysed. This perspective has practically never been used in academic research practice before. The perception of Whistler's painting in Russia has been specified based on an estimation of his creative work mentioned in the letters and critical publications of V. A. Serov, I. E. Grabar, A. N. Benua, and I. E. Repin. The sources attributed to the period of Ostroumova-Lebedeva's studies at Whistler's Parisian studio are listed. For the first time, material from Ostroumova-Lebedeva's archive deposited in the Russian National Library Manuscript Department has been published. This material is of great academic interest in the context of Russian and global art history. Whistler's manuscripts published here, the only ones known in Russia, are a unique testament to his creative activities in Paris. Refs 10. Figs 5.

Keywords: Whistler, Ostroumova-Lebedeva, art of the turn of the century, Russian art, West-European art.

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УИСТЛЕР И ОСТРОУМОВА-ЛЕБЕДЕВА. ПАРИЖ, 1899 ГОД: ИСТОРИЯ ОДНОГО АРХИВНОГО ДОКУМЕНТА

Санкт-Петербургский государственный академический институт живописи,
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Проанализированы малоизвестные аспекты истории искусства рубежа XIX–XX веков, творческие связи Дж. Э. М.-Н. Уистлера и А. П. Остроумовой-Лебедевой. Избранный ракурс рассмотрения ранее практически не фигурировал в научной традиции. Уточнены особенности восприятия живописи Уистлера в России на примерах оценки его творчества в письмах и критических публикациях В. А. Серова, И. Э. Грабаря, А. Н. Бенуа, И. Е. Репина. Приведены источники по периоду обучения Остроумовой-Лебедевой в парижской мастерской Уистлера. Впервые публикуются материалы из архива Остроумовой-Лебедевой, хранящиеся в отделе рукописей Российской национальной библиотеки. Эти материалы представляют большой научный интерес в контексте российского и мирового искусствознания. Опубликованы единственные в России рукописи Уистлера, уникальное свидетельство его деятельности в Париже. Библиогр. назв. 10. Ил. 5.

Ключевые слова: Уистлер, Остроумова-Лебедева, искусство рубежа веков, русское искусство, западноевропейское искусство.

“I do not impede you to grow your own, I do not want to impose you my own. I only aspire to give everyone the surest means to identify your own tendencies...”

James Abbott McNeill Whistler “Proposition”

“Here, I shall get the school, here, I shall stand firmly on my own feet, here, I shall assimilate the certain principles of art <...> I shall go through it all. Shall absorb a concepts of Whistler, his proposition...”

Anna Petrovna Ostroumova-Lebedeva
“Autobiographical Notes”

In the history of the 19th and 20th centuries art, the heritage of James Whistler (1834–1903) and Anna Petrovna Ostroumova-Lebedeva (1871–1955) are in different ranges but their names sound in a common register of the highest professionalism.

Ways of the great artist, a citizen of the United States of America, who worked the most part of his life in England and France, and the outstanding Russian artist from St. Petersburg have crossed in 1899. It was in Paris art studio, where Whistler had taught. This crossing has become for Ostroumova-Lebedeva the reference point of increasing artistic maturity, and for Whistler it was the point of mastery and pedagogical success. And perhaps also the start point of his childhood memories on the banks of the Neva, where he made his first steps in the art.

In 1855, leaving his home country to study in Paris studio of the famous Charles Gleyre (1806–1874) (together with Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley), Whistler said: “I told my family that I am going to Paris. Nobody objected. Yes, all this has already started with Petersburg’s times” [1, p. 33]. Indeed, both the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, where James Whistler was a private pupil of drawing classes at age eleven, and home lessons with art teacher Alexander Koritsky (1818–1866), in those time a student at the Academy, have had a profound influence on him and has become a classic foundation for the artist who discovered then other facets of art.

According to documents, Whistler family appear in the capital of the Russian Empire in 1842, engineer Major George Washington Whistler was invited by the Corps of Communications Engineers (on the order of the Emperor Nicholas I) for design and construction of the railway ‘St. Petersburg — Moscow’. This railway line was supposed to be the first of such large-scale in Russia, the earliest line ‘St. Petersburg — Tsarskoe Selo’ had local importance, as linking the capital with the summer Imperial residence.

Whistler family lived in Russia from 1842 to 1849 years. And, although the Petersburg period of the artist’s life is well studied, there are two episodes of those time which are not reflected in previous publications: the address of the family residence and the reason for the invitation of Koritsky as a home teacher of drawing (the materials are being prepared for publication).

In winter 1898–1899’s, Anna Petrovna, then still Ostroumova (after her marriage in 1905 she will be Ostroumova-Lebedeva) went to Paris for the improvement and deepening of art education, the foundations of which were obtained in the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, in studio of the famous Ilya Repin (1844–1930).

The choice of the French capital for the vivifying contact with alluring novelty of contemporary art certainly was a personal decision of the young artist. But it also reflected

a general tendency for young artistic forces of Russia — to expand their landmarks in the art, personally to see and understand, accept or reject a new forms and ideas of nowadays.

The powerful stream of Russian artists rushes in the world recognized center of arts, which was seeted by multitude of currents and trends, but at the same time remain a traditional forge of workmanship.

Parisian artistic environment was exuberated by Russian talents. “New faces appear in the studio, the Russian and French poets and writers: Konstantin Balmont, Valeriy Bryusov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexei Tolstoy, Alexander Anichkov, Ivan Strannik, Victor Hoffman, Nikolay Gumilyov, Peter Boborykin, Maxim Kovalevsky, Alexander Mersereau, Rene Gil, Sadna Levy, Gan River, Romain Rolland, Alexis Merodak-Jeannot and many others. Of the artists in this period were regular visitors: Nikolai Dosekin, Boris Matveyev, Aleksander Shervashidze, Alexander Benois, Stepan Yaremich, Alexander Yakimchenko, Margarita Sabashnikova, Nicholas Tarhov, Antonina Westfalen...”, — Elizabeth Kruglikova remembers, whose studio on the Buassonad street was one of the centers of attraction of Russian youth [2, p. 99].

A numerous studios of the city were crowded with students from Russia and Anna Ostroumova organically entered in a magical and creative atmosphere of discipleship, which was penetrated by modern impulses. But the choice of her future master, which Anna made, was exceptional: Ostroumova, only one of the Russian colleagues of her generation, became a student of Whistler. At that time he taught at the “Academy of Carmen”.

What was behind such unusual decision? After all, the work of this outstanding artist in the end of 19th century was little known in Russia and enjoyed a modest success, which was interspersed with stinging criticism. Painting of Whistler was for the first time presented in St. Petersburg exhibition of the English and German watercolors, which was organized by Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929) in 1897, in the halls of Baron Stieglitz. Then, it was at the exhibition of painting and sculpture in 1899 also under the auspices of Diaghilev in the premises of the magazine “Mir iskusstva”.

Even among the leading masters of Russian art was not unanimity in the perception of his painting. “On the question of what he thoughts about Whistler, Valentin Serov (1865–1911) replies: “I do not know him. In London, I saw something that was not very interesting, but the best is allegedly in America, where I had not been” [3, p. 145].

Konstantin Somov (1869–1939) was more blunt about to expose of 1897 he said: “Whistler, smart aleck, sent blots and sells them for a thousands. As portrait he calls two or three smears in ‘soft tones’, that is all. However, these smears are piquant” [5, p. 58].

Sergei Diaghilev was upheld the completely opposite view, describing the exhibition of the British and German watercolors: “As the great English painter Whistler, despite the fact that his works are some few and they do not give an idea about this major artists, yet his little pastel and charming watercolor portrait we seem to be almost the best things at the exhibition. Technique and amazing harmony of colors can be seen even in these small things” [5, p. 63].

Later in 1905, Alexander Benois (1870–1960) describing the painting of Whistler, considered that “...when you read in the catalog the occurrence date of the best works of Whistler, you can not believe your eyes: but to write like this only now, but this is the last word of fashion and even snobbery, a true “modern-style” painting” [6, p. 48].

Perhaps only Repin has perceived the art of Whistler reticently, but highly objectively. He highlights the work of Whistler, describing his impressions of the Paris exhibition

of the Salon of Champ de Mars, and generally believing that “It is a market of what you want” [7, p. 425]. The Russian painter, with his special sense of true art, gives the deep characteristic of Whistler as the master of subtle psychological portrait and almost impressionistic forms of expression. “There are many good portraits. I particularly liked the one — the work of an Englishman Whistler. He represents a full length figure of the passionate sportsman, dressed around a gray: stockings, which are adhering lean legs, in cap, which is barely covering the restless head; this young man is full of diverse sport <...> And now, still in a state of all previous deeds inertia, he passionately thinks what else would be invent to surprise his friends who has long time considered him as the first in all the exploits and adventures of fun” [7, p. 424].

The opinion of the famous Russian master was a natural expression of the very essence of “true living artist”, as Alexander Benois called him rightly [8, p. 629]. The nature of Repin was opened for everything new in all gradations, but only on the basis of high professional mastery. This talent of the outstanding artist-teacher by powerful flow projected on his students and eventually created a wide variety of artistic personality, always forming a special artistic outlook. From the studio of Repin went out totally different artists which later formed the glory of Russian art: Konstantin Somov, Fyodor Malyavin, Ivan Bilibin, and many others.

Anna Ostroumova-Lebedev was also fully experienced the charm and force of the Repin-teacher talent in the years of study at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. It was from Repin she finds out about Whistler and has inspired by the idea to get in his Paris studio, “I want to get into the studio of Whistler. It is called the” Academy of Carmen”. This is American artist, the greatest European master, Repin said to us a lot about him, and said that higher him in Europe is not artist today. In Luxembourg, I just saw a single his thing — a “Portrait of the master” is really a marvelous thing. And now I have a terrible desire to enter to him and to paint there...” — she admits [9, pp. 141–142].

In early January 1899, Anna was admitted to the “Academy of Carmen”, the studio of Whistler which has located in Stanislas passage, near the Montparnasse Boulevard. She was convinced that: “Whistler is the greatest European master, and if they find out at the academy, that I am learning from him, all will go crazy with envy” [9, p. 146].

Among the many art schools of Paris “Academy Carmen” firmly held the position of a highly professional, but not overly expensive educational establishment, even despite of the teaching there the famous Whistler. “Classes are from eight in the morning until noon. I shall pay the thirty-five francs and ten francs, ‘pour enter’...”, — she mentions [9, p. 144]. For comparison, the tuition fees:

I. “Colarossi Academy” — Daytime classes: 16 francs a month (for gentlemen) and 20 francs (for ladies).

II. “The Academy Julian” — a full course of painting and sculpture: 31 francs a month (for gentlemen) and 60 francs (for ladies).

III. “School of painting and drawing” of professors Pierre Bonnard and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes — daytime classes: 100 francs a month (ladies and gentlemen)” [10, p. 75].

The memories of the classes in the Whistler studio is one of the most important parts of the “Autobiographical Notes” by Ostroumova-Lebedeva. On these pages, full of deep emotions, discloses a excitement, doubts, searching of the young artist, and above all there is the image of the Whistler — teacher. Here the atmosphere of studio and the process of unique artistic style birth had transferred very authentically. It could hardly be

done more deeply, truly and thinner than the Russian student did it herself; it remains only to look into the amazing mirror of the era and personality of the outstanding Russian master of fine art with admiration and respect.

However, it should be focused on one episode from the memoirs by Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva which has direct relevance to the topic of this article. Among the students of Whistler's studio the American women were prevailed, and of course the English language sounded in lectures, conversations, instructions of the Master and student's communication with each other. It is inevitable that Ostroumova-Lebedeva felt lonely: "I am, to my chagrin, did not understand their language, as I did not know in English, and not participated in their common talks" [9, p. 145]. But she spoke French perfectly, and very soon it was taken into consideration by Whistler: "Today, he had a long talk with his Americans, sitting on the edge of podium, and then came to me (I was standing on the sidelines and nothing understanding) and, to my surprise, he gave me a paper, where had written in French his previous 'conference' (lecture). It is surprisingly carefully! This sheet I shall keep as a shrine..." [9, p. 149].

This "shrine" really exists. It is located in the archive of Anna Petrovna Ostroumova-Lebedeva in the Russian National Library (NLR, F.1015, d.1156). This article is the first publication of this material. The document consists of four sheets and numbered sequentially throughout, but it is abstracted from the real sequence of the papers appearance in the hands of the Russian student of Whistler. It is clear from correlation of the chronology of the sheets with the chronology of the facts which were reflected in the "Autobiographical Notes". Therefore, the author on the basis of the analytical correlation will use its own numbering, leaving the archives in brackets.

Sheet N 1 (N 4, NLR) of "Proposition", written by Whistler in English, by his typical graceful and, at the same time, sure, solid handwriting. It is precisely this text, with its refined line graphic of letter's contours which Ostroumova-Lebedeva could not read.

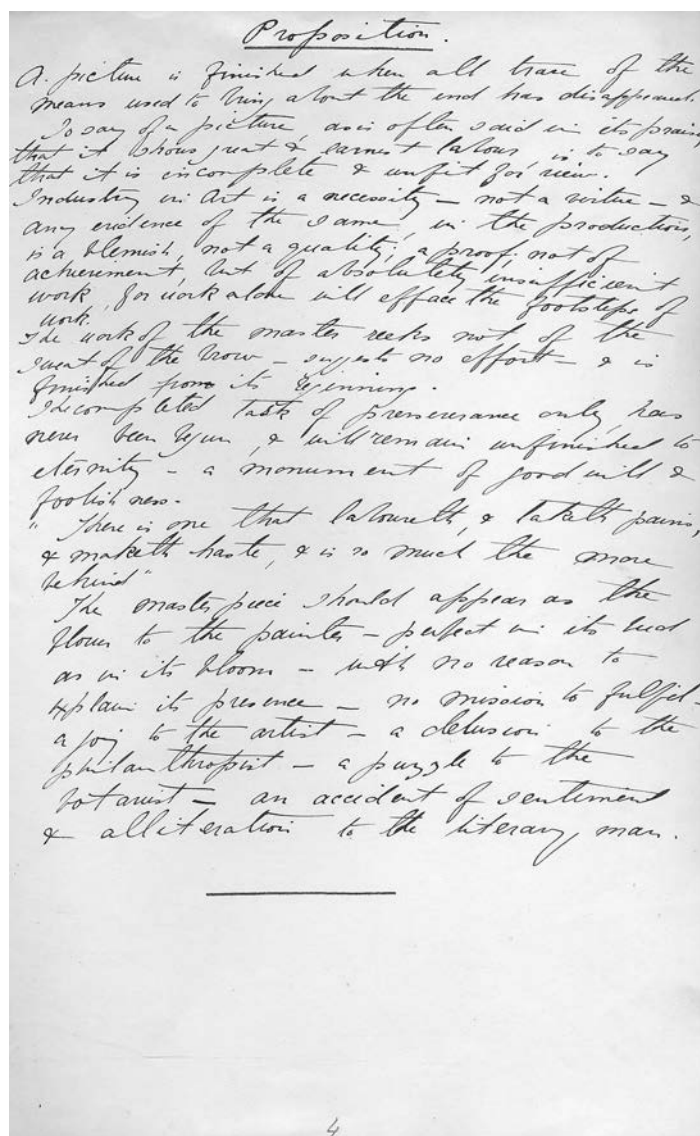
Sheet N 2 (N 3, NLR) of "Proposition", written by typical Whistler handwriting in French, especially for his student from Russia. The text contains many inscriptions, by light blue pencil. Ostroumova-Lebedeva who knew French perfectly, has corrected inaccuracies of Whistler's translation from English.

Sheet N 3 (N 1, NLR) of "Proposition", printed in French by hectograph method with editing of Ostroumova-Lebedeva. After the text, at the bottom of the page there is the famous monogram "butterfly of Whistler". Further, the note in Russian, by hand of Ostroumova-Lebedeva: "It handed me by Whistler in his studio of M-me Rossi in 1899 — January, 27th, after the end of classes. It contains a brief summary of his previous conference and Whistler translated it for me in French. A. O."

This sheet is folded into four, on its back there is another record of Ostroumova-Lebedeva: "The principles of art made by famous Whistler in his studio when I was his student in 1899. A. Ostroumova-Lebedeva".

Sheet N 4 (N 2, NLR) of "Proposition", also printed in French by hectograph method identical to sheet № 3 but without inscriptions.

On the back of the other Whistler's conference sheet in French, by hand of Ostroumova-Lebedeva (the same handwriting as on the sheet № 3). In the text there are translations of some words in Russian, placed over the French ones. For example: "bessozatel'no", "propisyvat' ", "sokrashchenny", "preuvelichenny", "vdolbit' v golovu" (Original spelling is kept).

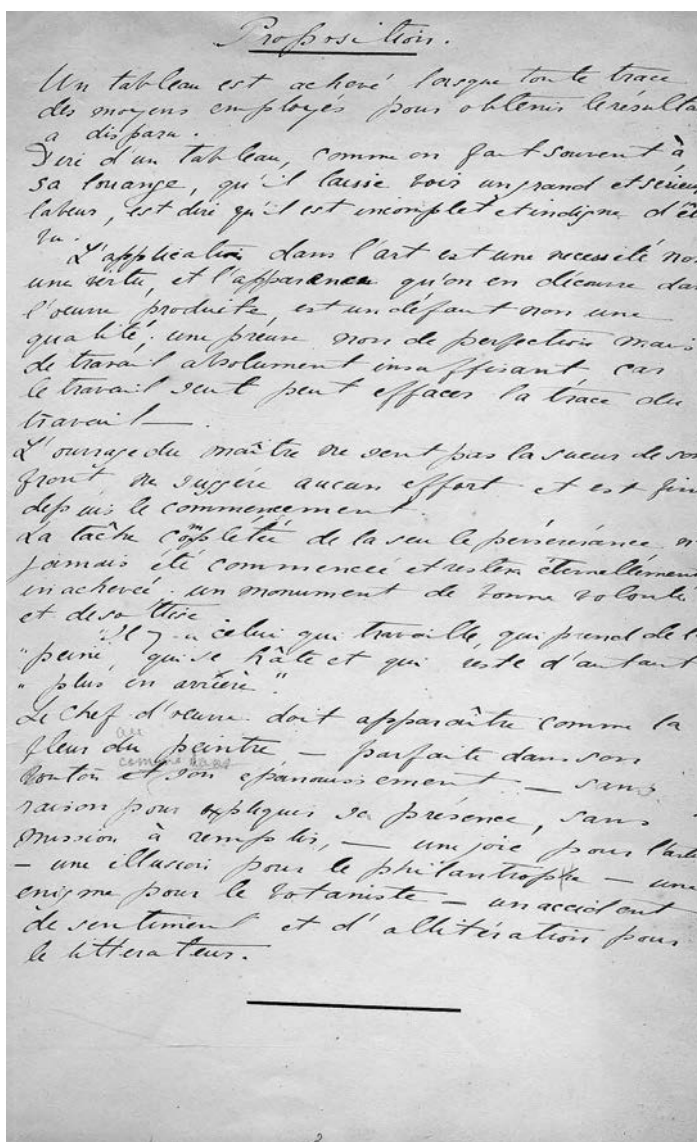


1. «Propositions», the autobiographical text of Whistler in English (N 4; NLR)

Particular importance of the archival document is undoubtedly:

- I. Sheets N 1 and N 2, these are the only manuscripts of Whistler in Russia.
- II. Sheet N 3 is a rare evidence of the activity of Whistler-teacher in Paris.
- III. All of the sheets are the documentary evidence of the particular episode, which was described by Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva that is the living history.

Paris in 1899 left a deep trace in the life of Anna Petrovna Ostroumova: "What a happy time! Everything was so interesting and new for me <...> life went between work and entertainment — quickly and brightly. Everything was perceived with extreme sharp-



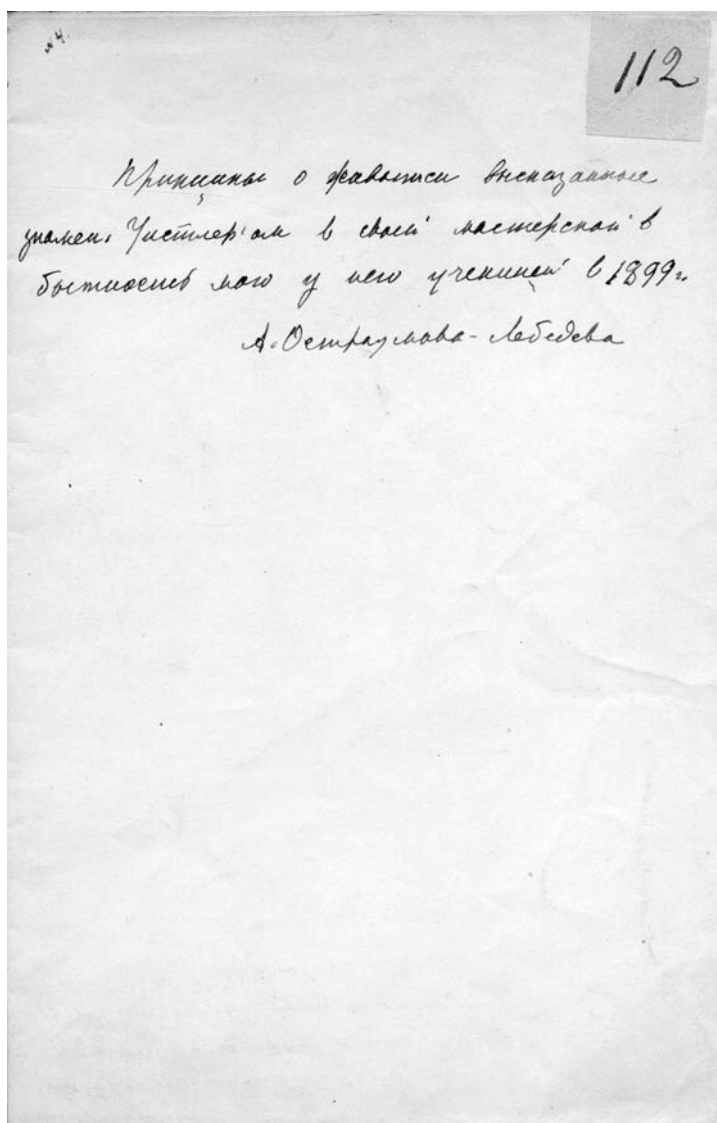
2. «Propositions», the autobiographical text of Whistler in French, with editing of Ostroumova-Lebedeva (N 3; NLR)

ness”, — as she always remembered [9, p. 154–155]. And Whistler’s studio was destined to become the symbol of this “happy time”.

Here are some Whistler’s thoughts from his French abstracts, which he made especially for Anja Ostroumova, many of them sound like the aphorisms and eloquently speak about their author... Later she translated them into Russian:

“A picture is finished when all traces of efforts to achieve the result can not be seen”;

“To say about a picture in her praise that in it is visible a large and serious work, it is like saying that the picture is not finished”;



4. «Proposition», printed in French by hectograph method with editing of Ostroumova-Lebedeva (N 1 — sheet back; NLR)

“You have to pay attention to the significant are typical features of nature and omit the thousands of shades which our eye sees <...> Most importantly — it is necessary to give the impression of the subject of reality, placing it in the space”;

“The Master is recognized when he is able to paint deep planes”;

“The real master is one who knows from the beginning what will be at the end of his work”;

“When any student has achieved good results, he did not deserve a praise. When he was first, who has noticed the error, he did not deserve reproach. A true student’s success was consisted in the mastering of art technique, his craft”.

Le peuple ne regarde jamais la nature avec le sens de son
 affluence picturale — c'est pour cette raison, par parenthèse, qu'il ne re-
 garde son plus jamais un tableau avec le sens de la nature, mais
 encombrent par habitude en se référant à ce qu'il a vu dans les
 autres tableaux.

Maintenant dans les tableaux, causant de l'année, il n'y a
 qu'une seule couleur clair, qui se voit, en toutes circonstances, que
 la personne regarde — dans la lumière adoucie de l'appartement ou
 au dehors, en plein air.

L'unique but de la peinture, au sens propre, est de faire sortir
 son homme du cadre, — ce se faisant point, ce se contraire d'homme
 devrait réellement se tenir et en vérité se tenir en dedans du cadre, et
 à une profondeur d'éloignement égale à la distance, à laquelle le peintre
 est son modèle.

Le cadre est, en fait, la fenêtre à travers laquelle le peintre re-
 garde son modèle, et rien ne pourrait être plus inartistique que l'usage
 brutal de ramener le modèle en dedans de la fenêtre.

Cependant c'est là, la fautive condition des choses à laquelle
 tous ont été habitués, et dans le formidable effort pour la produire
 en a épuisé l'imagination — les moyens traditionnels de l'insuffisance
 ne peuvent aller plus loin.

Les lumières ont été forcées, jusqu'à ce qu'il ne reste plus que
 le blanc du tube — les ombres ont été épaissies, jusqu'à ce que le noir
 demeure seul. A peine un trait de visage se trouve-t-il à sa place, et
 terrible est l'effort de faire venir fermement en avant et, au
 milieu de cette lutte désordonnée pour l'effet, l'honnête vérité n'a
 qu'une triste chance tomber à plat, sans couleur et sans force.

Le maître de Madrid, lui-même, à côté de ce monstrueux sac de
 la médiocrité, avait considéré comme fade : beau, bien sûr, mais pas
dans le mouvement.

Tandis que si les gens pouvaient être amenés à tourner les yeux seuls,
 un instant, avec la saine faculté de comparaison, sur leurs semblables
 qui forment dans la galerie, ils pourraient être conduits à entendre (peu-
 être, j'en doute, tant est aveugle leur croyance dans le mauvais) combien
 peu ils ressemblent aux impudentes images sur les murs, combien ils sont
 de couleurs tranquilles ! „ combien gris „ combien pas de ton. Et alors
 pourrait apparaître à leur intelligence comprise, comment ils
 avaient pris la joggrie pour la maîtrise, et les quelles — misérables
 méthodes l'imposture leur avait été inculquée.

5. «Proposition», printed in French by hectograph method with editing of Ostroumova-Lebedeva. The same as N 3, but without notes (N 2; NLR)

On sheet back is the handwritten text in french: the record of another Whistler's conference, by hand as Ostroumova-Lebedeva (compare with corrections on the sheet N 3) with translation of certain words in Russian (N 2 — sheet back; NLR)

Finally Ostroumova-Lebedeva admits: “He has talked a lot and taught us, but I am, unfortunately, not all recorded in those time, and not all sheets of his printed conferences was kept by me” [9, p. 149, 150, 151].

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