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# THE IMAGES OF ELEMENTS IN THE ARTISTIC CULTURE OF RUSSIA

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## WILDFIRE IN A. K. DENISOV-URALSKY'S CANVASES: DESTINIES OF THE PAINTINGS

The article focuses on one aspect of the artistic work of Yekaterinburg-born painter, A. K. Denisov-Uralsky: the genesis and evolution of *The Forest Fire*. The article sheds light on the fate of this famous 1898 painting, including its exhibition history in Russia, its reproduction with the help of S. M. Prokudin-Gorsky (a pioneering specialist in colour photography), its appearance in the St. Louis World's Fair, and its further reproduction and exhibitions while in the United States between 1904 and 1979. The article also documents the subsequent variations of the same motif, which the painter created for his 1911 exhibition *The Urals and Their Treasures*. The author further examines interpretations of the same theme by Russian and non-Russian artists who were predecessors and contemporaries of Denisov-Uralsky. The article analyzes the influence of Denisov-Uralsky's painting on North American artists, by examining similarities in the composition and recurrences of the theme in works both by beginning painters and masters. Resulting from systematic research and analysis, the article makes apparent the significance of the wildfire theme in the work of Denisov-Uralsky. Artworks from the Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts are at the basis of such research, along with the works from world museums and private collections, which have yet to be scrutinized for the thematic history of wildfires. The comparison of artwork and approaches to the theme of wildfires allows for conclusions about the appeal of this artistic theme in general and of its interpretation in particular.

*Keywords:* A. K. Denisov-Uralsky; *The Forest Fire*; Russian painting at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Ural Fine Art, USA Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; 1904 World's Fair; interpretation and borrowing in painting.

Статья посвящена одному из аспектов творческого наследия художника А. К. Денисова-Уральского, уроженца Екатеринбурга. Анализируется генезис и эволюция ключевого в изобразительном наследии живописца сюжета «Лесного пожара». Приводятся новейшие сведения о судьбе холста, созданного в 1898 г.: выставочная история в России, репродуцирование при участии пионера цветной фотографии С. М. Прокудина-Горского, участие во Всемирной выставке в Сент-Луисе, воспроизведение и экспонирование в период нахождения полотна в США (1904–1979). Систематизируется информация о поздних вариантах сюжета, созданных

А. К. Денисовым-Уральским для своей выставки «Урал и его богатства» (1911). Рассматривается контекст и трактовка темы у отечественных и зарубежных художников – предшественников и современников Денисова-Уральского. Впервые анализируется влияние этого произведения на творчество североамериканских художников, приводятся данные о повторениях и интерпретациях композиции наивными живописцами и мастерами декоративно-прикладного искусства. В результате систематического поиска и последующего анализа выявляются свидетельства как актуальности и аттрактивности сюжета для изобразительного искусства второй половины XIX – начала XX в., так и особого значения его для творчества конкретного художника. В основу исследования легли живописные произведения, представленные на выставке в Екатеринбургском музее изобразительных искусств, архивный материал и ранее не рассматривавшиеся в контексте изучения истории сюжета произведения из отечественных и зарубежных музеев и частных коллекций. Сопоставление произведений и подходов к трактовке темы стихийного бедствия позволили сделать выводы об особой востребованности как сюжета в целом, так и конкретной его трактовки.

*Ключевые слова:* А. К. Денисов-Уральский, «Лесной пожар», русская живопись рубежа XIX–XX вв., художественная культура Урала, искусство США XX в., Всемирная выставка 1904 г., интерпретации и заимствования в живописи.

Although fire has been with humankind since prehistoric times, the depictions of disasters caused by wildfires appear relatively later in the visual arts. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, few depictions exist of an all-devouring blaze. Even then, they often have either a mythological meaning (like “The Forest Fire” by Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1505, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), or they connect to the destruction of the cities (like “L'incendie de Rome” by Hubert Robert, dated at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, now in Musée des Beaux-Arts André Malraux, Le Havre). There are almost no wildfires among the early depictions of fire.

The Romantics’ and Realist artists’ interest in national and local landscapes, which emerged in Early Modernity, made the artists focus upon forest fires. A growing shortage of forests in Europe, in turn, created awareness of the value of this resource in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Artists working on the ‘periphery’ of European art in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—in North America, Finland, Russia, and Australia—created a great variety of images that reveal different aspects of disaster wrought by wildfire.

Perhaps the only researcher closely examining depictions of wildfires in art is Professor Stephen J. Pyne at Arizona State University, USA. He studies the history of fighting forest fires and touches upon cultural aspects of the problem, apart from merely technical ones. In his book he outlines several national schools of art, devoting attention to their depiction of wildfires in nature. He, for example, discusses the tradition of prairie wildfires depicted in the Hudson School paintings (a number of paintings from the 1830s by

George Catlin (1796–1872)) [Pyne 2012, p. 124–128] and in a subsequent generation of the so-called ‘artists in the saddle’ (such as Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), “White Mountains, New Hampshire”, ca. 1865, Thomas Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa, Oklahoma).

The American researcher highlights the popular theme of bush wildfires in the artworks of Australian painters (See, eg., John Longstaff (1861–1941), “Gippsland, Sunday Night, February 20<sup>th</sup>”, 1898, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) [Pyne 2012, p. 132–136].

Isolated depictions of forest fires and firefighting activities can be found in the works of artists from those regions where forestry played an important role in everyday life. As such, this theme was exploited by Finnish and Lithuanian artists (Gustaf Wilhelm Edlund (1829–1907), “Finnish swidden, converting forest to field”, 1877 [Pyne, 2012, p. 69]; Vincentas Dmachauskas (ca. 1805–1862), “Forest Fire”, 1850s to the beginning of the 1860s, Lietuvos dailės muziejus, Vilnius). The wildfire, which inflicted considerable damage on the unique pine forest on the coast of the Bay of Biscay (the famous French *Landes*), was captured by a representative of late French realism, Étienne Mondineu (1872–1940), on his canvas “Fire in the Landes” (“Incendie dans les Landes”, 1901, La mairie, Houeillès).

A major representative of the Russian Realism School, Vassily Polenov (1844–1927), addressed the theme of wildfires in his pencil drawing, “Fire in Dry Forest” (1877, in a private collection) and in his small oil-on-cardboard study, “Fire in the Forest”, (ca. 1877). Both works, apart from depicting the wildfire, have figures in their foreground. This *staffage* technique diminishes the poignancy of nature’s force. Likewise, a known master of hunting scenes, Vladimir Muraviev (1861–1940), creates his own “Forest Fire” at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (now in a private collection).

However, the subject of wildfires in Russian art was explored most consistently by Alexey Kozmich Denisov-Uralsky (1864–1926). Denisov-Uralsky was a native of Yekaterinburg, a prominent stone-cutter and jeweler, a known Russian entrepreneur and an advocate for the natural wealth of the Urals.

Having received no formal artistic education, Alexey Kozmich relied heavily upon his own taste. Freedom from academic standards allowed him to develop a unique talent, at times naive and at times subject to fashionable trends. The originality of Denisov-Uralsky paintings was determined by the artist’s sincerity and his spontaneity in depicting his beloved Urals, including its harsh nature, which frequently threatened natural disasters.

In Denisov-Uralsky’s artistic life, an important event that shaped his development was the Siberian and Ural Scientific and Industrial Exhibition held in Yekaterinburg in 1887. It not only distinguished the 23-year-old master, Alexey Denisov, with the Great Silver Medal for his stone compositions, chipped stones paintings and icons, but it also presented him with an opportunity to acquaint himself with the works of leading Russian masters: Ivan Aivazovsky, Vassily Perov, Ivan Shishkin, and Urals painters, such as Alexey Korzukhin, Nikolay Plyusnin, Vladimir Kazantsev and Petr Vereshchagin. A few years after the Siberian-Ural Exhibition, Denisov

arrived in St. Petersburg and became a student of the Drawing School of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts [Павловский, с. 9]. He attended a few courses before he was compelled to return to Yekaterinburg.

The theme of wildfires will occupy the artist for at least twenty years. He returns to it over and over again, rethinking his own work, retracing a path from a study to a landscape painting, from small forms to epic canvas.

In 1887 Denisov paints a "Burning Grass" study (now in Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts) (Figure 4). With fast brush strokes he outlines burnt grass blades, and the flames leap and blaze through thick smoke.

Within a year, his first painting was finished; it was a small, even miniature work by the author's own standards. It did not show the forest wildfire *per se*; the viewer notes a flaming sky, and reflections back-light the forest and flicker on the water. Black cut-outs, reminiscent of landscape paintings from German Romanticism, represent the trees in the foreground. However, this version did not satisfy the artist; he kept searching for a more expressive composition, collecting observational materials for drawing.

A Ural researcher, A. A. Anfinogenov, Denisov's contemporary, observed the artist painting a burning forest behind *Chistoye* swamp at *Beryozovaya Dacha*:

A fascinating scene of a grandiose forest wildfire was seen from the top of *Kamennye Palatki* hill near Shartash Lake, where at that time one could observe a far-reaching view of the surroundings... A man was sitting on the top of *Palatki*, painting the wildfire scene. Interested by the painting, I approached the artist. The small piece of paper on top of a study box truly amazed me by the brightness and the truthfulness of the colors. The scene of the wildfire and this study, most probably unfinished, have forever stayed in my memory [cit. by: Семенова, с. 44].

Nine years later Denisov returns to the topic that captivated him. A study dated 1897 (now in Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts) is oriented vertically, unlike earlier works, and has a lower horizon, allowing for a larger space to depict the sky. On the foreground the viewer sees a young pine tree, untouched by fire and lit by the sun's rays; behind it there is a burning tree, the center of the composition. A thick plume of smoke is crossing the picture diagonally. The right upper corner contains a strip of blue sky that symbolizes hope. A device of Romanticist paintings is used in this work by doubling the source of light: it comes from the sun in the foreground and the fire in the central part of the canvas. With this device Denisov succeeds in expressing two forces of nature: life-giving sunlight and destructive wildfire. This contrast reveals and expresses the drama within the painting.

The same year Alexey Kozmich replicates this composition in a large oil painting (now in Perm State Art Gallery). The oil painting differs from the earlier study in its reinterpretation of the forest: a big, tall pine tree appears in the foreground. Apparently, the author found this composition effective, as the next year he reproduced it in watercolor (now in Sverdlovsk Regional History Museum) (Figure 2) and presented to his friend, the Urals writer D. N. Mamin-Sibiryak [Будрина, с. 51].

The need to connect the depiction of natural disaster to a certain locality makes the artist return to the horizontally oriented canvas. In 1899 in the magazine, "Novoe vremya", another variant on the same theme is published [Выставка картин], and the canvas was exhibited at the spring exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts, attracting considerable attention.

On the large canvas we see the approaching fire. The artist makes the viewer feel the heat and the inevitability of its advance. Streams of fire on the left part of the painting and fallen wood on the right attest to the on-rushing flames. Absence of a visible barrier between the natural disaster and the viewer intensifies the sense of danger.

This painting became the centerpiece of the first personal exhibition of Denisov-Uralsky, open in Yekaterinburg on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, 1900. At the end of December the exhibition was moved to Perm, where it appeared in the house of N. V. Meshkov, a known ship owner and philanthropist. Here too "The Forest Fire" attracted attention. The painting was placed in a separate, small room with electric lighting and heated stoves, which added to the overall effect. This setting even allowed "Permskie vedomosti" newspaper to observe ironically: "Barely heated rooms, provided by Mr. Meshkov for the exhibition, cool the visitor's impression; he is ever eager to sit on a chair and observe 'The Forest Fire', which emits heat from no less than two ovens on both sides of it. As you can see, even Kuindzhi had not thought of creating such an effect: a nicely heated room and a landscape of 'The Forest Fire'" [cit. by: Семенова, с. 50–51].

In 1902, the same work was featured in a mobile exhibition of paintings of the Urals and its mineral and mining resources, opened by the artist in St. Petersburg. Denisov was so concerned with the consequences of wildfires in Russia that he even introduced proposals on the improvement of wildfire control measures in the "Guide to the exhibition":

Forest wildfires are a devastating scourge of forests, not only in Central Russia, but also in the Urals; it is there that the fires have a wilder character due to the prevalence of thick pine forestation, stretching for hundreds of miles. A summer does not pass without wildfires in one or another area of the Urals... Forest fires have a strong effect upon the factories and the factory population, depriving the people of the only fuel existing here [Денисов-Уральский, 1902, с. 98–99].

In early 1904, the Muscovites had a chance to acquaint themselves with the painting at the exhibition, "Urals and Its Treasures". Also at that time, from some of the artist's paintings, S. M. Prokudin-Gorsky made colored plates that were reproduced on several postcards (Figure 3). "The Forest Fire" was among those reproduced. In the same year the picture became one of the most important pieces in "Russian California" section at the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri [Official catalogue, p. 290–291].

Unfortunately, the collection of paintings and graphic works, gathered by A. K. Denisov-Uralsky for the St. Louis exhibition, did not return to

Russia. “The Forest Fire” remained in America. US researchers have traced the tragic and confusing fate of the Russian collection from this exhibition. The failure of its business plan ended with the organizer’s bankruptcy, which caused the works to be confiscated and sold [Williams, p. 1–5]. In spite of these difficulties, “The Forest Fire” was spared. In February 1905, shortly after the exhibition’s completion, the work was acquired by an organizer, the American entrepreneur, Adolphus Busch, for his house in Dallas [Pyne 2008, p. 51–54]. In March 1979, the US National Endowment for the Humanities on behalf of August Busch Jr. formally handed “The Forest Fire” to the Soviet government [Williams, p. 1–5]. The above mentioned Stephen J. Pyne devoted several years to studying the history of this painting and its various emulators [Pyne 2008].

For a long time the painting was thought to remain at the Russian Embassy in Washington or to be stored in one of the governmental residencies. However, a new search in 2014, approaching the anniversary of A. K. Denisov-Uralsky’s exhibition, brought unexpected success. It turns out that the canvas was transferred to Tomsk Regional Museum of Arts in 1982 and in 1993 was featured in a published catalogue of the museum’s collection. Moreover, the research fellows at the museum completed an attribution appraisal, comparing the museum’s large canvas (198 by 270 cm) from 1898 with the publication in “Novoye vremya” magazine, confirming that the painting in their possession was indeed the famous one that ostensibly ‘disappeared’ [Тюрина].

Thus, the first monumental version of “The Forest Fire”, which participated in the 1899 exhibition at the Academy of Arts, in the 1902 exhibition in St. Petersburg, in the 1904 Moscow exhibition, “Urals and Its Treasures”, and in the St. Louis World’s Fair of the same year, is now located in Tomsk Regional Museum of Arts.

While preparing the second exhibition, “Urals and Its Treasures”, which was scheduled to open in spring 1911 in St. Petersburg, Denisov-Uralsky decided to create a new monumental painting on the same engrossing subject.

His search for a new approach to the wildfire theme resulted in a relatively small painting named “Wildfire Approaching”, featured at the 1911 exhibition. In this work Denisov changes the direction of the smoke column and slightly moves the fire deeper into the composition. Unfortunately, the work’s current location is not known. The only evidence testifying to its existence is a line in the catalogue for “Urals and Its Treasures” and a picture print, made during the exhibition (Photography atelier of K. Bulla, 1911, Central State Archive of Documentary Films, Photographs, and Sound Recordings, St. Petersburg) [Будрина, с. 52].

However, in 1910 Denisov created a new version of “The Forest Fire” (now in Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts) (Figure 1). This canvas, shown at the end of the paintings’ section of the artist’s solo exhibition, very similar to its predecessor, did not leave the viewer cold. Similar to his earlier exhibition, the artist devoted several pages of his catalogue to the contemplation of wildfires and his interpretation of their significance:

Everything is covered in smoke. It smells of burning. As through the mist, a scorching red core of the sun is lurking through the thick haze of smoke. People and animals alike experience a heavy, dispiriting mood. The forest is burning, and it does so not for a day or two, but for weeks. In Russia, the rage of the wildfire is terrible, but it can be paralyzed by the communal efforts of people: they make clearings, they dig ditches and cover burning areas with sand, thus making the fire die down and stop.

In the Urals, however, wildfires are a devastating natural disaster that can not be overcome. The limited population of the region, wild mountainous landscape, abundance of forests with predominance of resinous conifers, as well as large masses of dried, fallen wood and moss give the natural disaster full potential for showing its terrifying force and emptying at once dozens of miles of forest, leaving in its wake naked, black trunks in grey ash covering smoldering ground. In most cases, forest fires happen because of the carelessness of an ignorant population.

When the forest fire picks up, it knows no obstacle. It thrusts from the valleys to the mountains; it shoots burning branches around at immense range, spreading wildly on and on. The air is overheated so that it is hard to breathe, even from far away. A dreadful crash and crack, reminiscent of shooting, fill the air. Wind that rises at every fire turns into a storm, which has no barriers. All living creatures flee in terror seeking salvation but die in the flames. There is no mercy for anyone.

Forest fires in the Urals are terrifying, grandiose and a magnificent tableau, a natural disaster that, unfortunately, keeps rampaging year in, year out.

Every year vast areas of forest are scorched completely. In 1884, a wildfire destroyed around 5000 square versts of taiga, and it will require many years to erase those awful traces of raging disaster [Денисов-Уральский 1911, с. 75–76].

This painting, acquired by Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century from a private collection, became a centerpiece of the 2014 anniversary exhibition. Here again, one sees a work of epic scale, reflecting the significance of its theme. A higher point of view, often favoured by Denisov, offers the prospect of a rocky ledge with mighty pines and an old giant deadwood on top of it. Further on there is a thick, lush forest and then flames that devour tall trees. A colossal column of smoke dissects the sky, broadcasting the wildfire to far away corners. The sense of powerful and inevitable disaster is accented by the brushwork, which is fierce and sprawling, almost too coarse in its strokes, expressing the inner state of the artist, dismayed by rampant disaster. It seems that the painter did not create the painting from the comfort of his workshop but instead from nature, standing close by on a cliff to catch the fire's movement, propelled by the wind.

"Forest Fires" by A. K. Denisov-Uralsky fascinate the researcher not only with their number and the artist's thematic fascination, but also with the unusual attention that the 1898 version attracted and the role it played in applied and fine arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Understanding the role of advertising in attracting visitors to exhibitions, in 1904 Denisov-Uralsky commissioned eight colour clichés from his most cherished works. Apart from six landscapes of the Urals and a watercolor depicting minerals from the artist's collection, the clichés included "The Forest Fire" from 1898. These clichés were used for printing postcards; "The Forest Fire" alone went through six reprints [Мазохина, с. 39–40]. Total circulation of those reprints can be approximated at thirty to forty thousand pieces.

It is highly likely that those postcards served as sources for the earliest emulations of "The Forest Fire" in Russia and abroad. It should be noted that for the various works reviewed, a whole range of similarities to the original image can be demonstrated: on the left are bent, dark tree trunks on a lighter background and on the right, a group of entangled trees, several standing, one lying and one semi-fallen, with an exposed rootstock. The emulators also kept the fire's position, centered and drifting to the upper left.

Thus, A. A. Yagodkin's painting (1899–1918, Nizhny Tagil Museum of Fine Arts) features an almost complete central section from Denisov-Uralsky's canvas, with the addition of a smoky forest on the left and right, and an enlarged foreground with green lawn.

The theme of forest fires once again reappears in the Urals during the 1940s in the works of Ivan Kirillovich Slyusarev (1886–1962). Much like Denisov-Uralsky, he starts with painting burning grass (1942, Nizhny Tagil Museum of Fine Arts). Another painting with a burning forest appeared five years later (1947, Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts). In composition, this work is closer to Denisov's "Forest Fire" from 1910; however, Slyusarev's painting does not use dramatic juxtaposition between the heights in the foreground and the middle ground; the color scheme of the work is also more reserved. All in all, the work exhibits a more aloof character, lacking the passion of its predecessor.

Between 1912 and 1926, "The Forest Fire" could be seen in Beaux-Arts Centre in Dallas, Texas [Pyne 2008, p. 54]. An exhibition of the painting by its new American owners was accompanied with print reproductions. Only one calendar was printed in the beginning of 1930s, but it can be safely supposed that this edition was not the only one.

Another amazing example of "The Forest Fire" appears in a 1920s Japanese embroidery, which is stylized yet still close to original.

No less interesting is a porcelain cachepot produced by the Bavarian company "H&C Selb" and later hand-painted to reproduce a fragment of "The Forest Fire" [Fabulous]. The fragment is signed "Adolph Heidrich", an artist who worked for leading Chicago ateliers, and later, between 1915 and 1922 hand-painted porcelain in his own workshop.

Sometimes Denisov-Uralsky's composition received thematic additions. Thus, in one of the unsigned versions there is a depiction of a wooden cabin and a man, who walks with a bundle, on the background of Denisov's fire [Pyne, 2008, p. 53]. Another unknown artist's imagination combined the Urals "Fire" with the depiction of African snow peaks and a roaring lion in the foreground.

Relatively well-known American painters have turned to “The Forest Fire”. In 1925 Théodore Gégoux (1850–1931), a French Canadian, created a copy, which was extremely close to the original. Gégoux was a fine portraitist, who spent a few months in Paris in 1881, where he learned the latest artistic trends. In the late 1900s the painter left New York, where he had worked for over thirty years and moved to Oregon. There he painted portraits, views of neighborhoods and still-lives. Commissioned by a neighbor to make an image for a wall calendar, Gégoux created a small painting (56 by 71 cm) [Fire scene], reproducing Denisov-Uralsky’s canvas in a darker colour scheme, which can be attributed to the source image’s printing defects.

In the 1930s, Detroit native, John Aubrey Speer (1895–1955), who worked in Colorado, painted a series of independent compositions. We know at least three of his small paintings (all in private collections, USA), oil on cardboard, with similar compositional techniques: on the left, there is a burning forest (emulating Denisov-Uralsky in more or less detail), and on the right, a snowy mountain looms and a mighty tree towers, untouched by fire.

One of the most famous American naive artists, Anna Mary Robertson “Grandma” Moses (1860–1961), emulates “The Forest Fire”. In 1940 she created her own version named “A Fire in the Woods”, preserving, however, all the basic details of the original work. A picture by M. M. Robinson, dated the following year, 1941 is essentially a stylized interpretation of the 1898 painting [Forest Fire].

Towards the middle of the century, the interest of American artists towards Denisov-Uralsky’s painting remained active. An example includes a small work signed, “A. Salsich”, which alludes to the central part of “The Forest Fire”. Approximately in the same period, Louise Van Buren Bullcock (1903–2000) created her own version. Her undated canvas is named “Herb’s Forest Fire”.

In the process of collecting data on interpretations of “The Forest Fire” by A. K. Denisov-Uralsky, apart from the works described above, more than a dozen paintings by various unknown artists have been discovered, representing one or another version of the Urals painting, differing in quality, formats, and precision.

Perhaps no other works of a Russian artist evoked such number of emulations, interpretations, and variations by foreign masters. More surprising is the fate of Denisov-Uralsky, who passionately devoted his art to his native land, its preservation and popularization. The gifted artist has been almost completely forgotten in his homeland, and only recently his name and work have returned to a wider audience.

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