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NANA BY MARCEL SUCHOROWSKY: THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN EMPIRE’S MOST EXPENSIVE PAINTING

The article describes the story of painting Nana (1881) by Marcel Suchorowsky known as the most expensive painting sold by a painter in the Russian Empire. But the art piece differs a lot from the general line of the local art market situation, which was defined by special institutions, such as the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. The main aspects are taken into consideration, such as: critical analysis of the painting, the story of the plot, which refers to Émile Zola’s novel Nana, the painter’s individual and innovative exposition strategy, etc. The history of Nana and its special exhibitions in Europe and the USA through the period of 1981–2012 are described. Reports in the USA periodics serve as a special source of analysis, as long as they allow tracing Nana’s movements and public interest. It was exhibited in the “panorama” style using special lightning and additional objects to imitate the three-dimension space and thus became a popular entertainment. Painting Nana is a very interesting cultural phenomenon as long as it obtained notorious glory due to its provocative plot and an excellent academic technique. It is not only the surprising price, but public reaction that is the most important.

Keywords: Marcel Suchorowsky, *Nana*, relisting painting, panorama exhibition, art market.

Art market history proves that each new stunning money record for selling an art piece reveals interesting inner processes and marks changes not only in market itself, but both in society and culture. *Nana* (1881) by Marcel Suchorowsky is the most expensive art piece known in late 19th century in the Russian Empire. It was studied by Dmitriy Severyuhin (2008), one of the first scientists in the post-soviet period, who began to analyze the art market history. Unlike Western researchers for whom the study of the art market problems has been an integral part of the development of the arts and sciences, and for any art critic awareness of the economic situation is one of the traditional skills, the post-soviet science only begins talking about the influence on and role of practical economic factors in the realm of culture and art. But Dmitriy Severyuhin gives only brief history of *Nana*’s appearance and exceptional success at the art-market. No other serious research on this topic was made. We may name Donald S. Vogel’s book *Memories and Images: the World of Donald Vogel and Valley House Gallery*, where the further story of *Nana* after leaving the Russian Empire is described.

The main purpose of particular research is to describe history of *Nana* by Marcel Suchorowsky, known as the most expensive art piece sold by painter in the Russian Empire; to trace its history from the Russian Empire through Europe to the USA

from the beginning until nowadays and to depict its perception in society.

The analysis of the main authoritative body in the space of the art market of those times is indispensable. Art life in Europe through the late 17th till the end of the 19th centuries was under a total control of the Academies of Fine Art. Olga Dubova proposes to perceive an Academy as a social institution that naturally replaces the guilds and corresponds to the craft tradition of organizing artistic life (Dubova 2009, 235). This means that since the Academy’s appearance it had become a major factor in the space of the art market and overgrew other legitimizing institutions, such as the well known Paris Salon (France). Based on the order of Louis XIV in 1653, the Paris Salon under the Academy had been playing a key role in the artistic life of the country for the next two centuries. The participation in its exhibitions was obliged for all the painters who wanted to gain popularity. Selection of works was carried out by a special jury formed by the authorities.

Due to the centralization of artistic forces in one environment, the Academy regulated all aspects of the artistic space. They dictated the formal, stylistic, and genre aspects of artworks, determined their artistic value, and, consequently, the commercial success of the artist. Academic theory of creativity paid a great attention to professional perfection,

skill, and virtuosity of technique. Such a position of the classical art market may be understood in the common sense even at modern times as a fundamental principle to judge works of art the way how “good” it is performed in relation to accepted standards of the legitimate authority. In this we see what Pierre Bourdieu stated thinking about the principles of differentiation regarded as most legitimate by an autonomous cultural field:

Apart from laying bare the desire to exclude those artists suspected of submitting to external demands, the affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation over the object of representation, is the most specific expression of the field's claim to produce and impose the principles of a properly cultural legitimacy regarding both the production and the reception of an art-work (Bourdieu 1984).

As a result, on the basis of the evaluation principle used by the Academy, a work of art should be embodied in accordance with the methodological observance of the system of recognized rules and evaluated accordingly.

We notice the same situation in the Russian Empire, where the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg was the one and only ruler of the art field. Considering stated above, it is understood that the plots of the most respected artworks were either historical or mythological, and artworks were mostly of a big size and sophisticated composition. For example, famous *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1833, 4.56×6.51 m large) by Karl Bryullov (sold for 25 000 rubles to A. Demydov, the Duke of Sandomato) described the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (in 79 A.D.), disastrous volcano's steam and fire, falling sculptures of ancient gods and running people. Another famous art piece, the tragic painting *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on 16 November, 1581*, (1885, 1.99×2.54 m) by Ilya Repin was bought by Pavel Tretyakov for his famous gallery for 15 000 rubles. One of the most expensive art pieces *The Conquest of Siberia by Yermak Timofeyevich* (1895, 5.99×2.85 m large) by Vasily Surikov gloried the expansion of the Russian Empire and was bought by Emperor Alexander III for 40 000 rubles. In these circumstances, the biggest surprise is that the most expensive art piece sold in the Russian Empire is a comparably medium painting (1.8×2.7 m large) which describes a laying naked woman. She is not Venice or any other “proper” lady to be seen naked in public. The painting by Marcel Suchorowsky *Nana* (1881) depicts a title heroine, who is a prostitute, from a shocking novel written by Émile Zola, and it was sold for 42 000 rubles (Severyuhin

2008b, 431). This was indeed a scandalous situation that surprised the professional art market and general public. To understand why this artwork was so successful we need to consider a few aspects.

First of all, the plot of the painting was new and provocative. Émile Zola's *Nana* was first published in periodicals as one of a sequence of 20 novels that composed *Rougon-Macquart* series. First chapters were published in October, 1879, and the final part in February 1880. However, the main heroine first appeared in the earlier novel *L'Assommoir* in 1877 as a young girl, daughter of an abusive drunk. She lives in the slums of Paris and finally has no better choice than begin a life of prostitution. *Nana* tells the further story of title character Anna “Nana” Coupeau as she rises from an untalented operetta actress to a high-class prostitute. The story takes place during the last three years of the French Second Empire (1867–1870). Zola does not describe her appearance in details, only states that she is redhead and beautiful. It is her character and influence that she has on men that is important. Nana is in the first place “a disturbing woman with all the impulsive madness of her sex, opening the gates of the unknown world of desire” (Zola 1992). Nana destroys every man she deals with, taking all their money, playing with their feelings and hopes, driving many of them to ruin and even suicide. Her impact on many rich and powerful men is absolute and destructive. The story ends with Nana's death because of smallpox, as if her true nature concealed by her physical beauty has finally come to the surface with ugly cankered spots. The start of the Franco-Prussian War and the end of the Second Empire serve as an expressive decoration to the story end of a real *femme fatale*. Tragic and topical, Zola's novel was an immediate success and notorious glory, and the word “nana” gained the meaning “a mildly rude French term for a woman comparable to broad” in contemporary French (Wikipedia).

The French language was common for the Russian Empire's aristocracy since Catherine II, and new French literature was quite popular. The Russian translation of the novel *Nana* appeared the same year as it was fully published in France in 1880, also in periodicals, such as the newspapers *Novoe Vremia* (New Time) and *Novosti* (News) and in the magazine *Slovo* (Word). By the end of 1880, the novel was published in St. Petersburg as a full book. Although the novel was cut short due to censorship, it was still provocative.

Given the mentioned above, Marcel Suchorowsky names his painting *Nana* to emphasize the nature of the character using its glory in some way. This is not just a beautiful naked woman; it is a scandalous heroine, who, despite the fact that she is fictitious,

seems very real. Since Édouard Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1963) and *Olimpia* (1963) French public was already familiar with a real naked woman that had no longer been named Venice or Susanna in order to be decent. But for the Russian Empire Marcel Suchorowsky's gesture was new and bold. Erotic plots were known, but never had been a part of the high-level art world before. Marcel Suchorowsky not only made such a piquant art piece but applied it for competition to receive the title of Academic (this was the high point in the official hierarchy at the Imperial Academy of Arts). This is the key moment.

From the essay named *A few Words about the Paintings and Essays of Seductive Character. (Regarding the Exhibition of Nana Paintings by Suchorowsky and a Minute of Bliss by Rostovsky and the Novel Nana by Zola, etc.)* written by deacon Ivan Bukharev (published 1882) we know that "we have seen a lot of paintings like *Nana* in art shops at Kuznetsov Bridge. These were images of completely naked women in different poses; paintings of both small and big sizes, of course much smaller than *Nana*" (Bukharev 1882, 5–6). The essential point for deacon I. Bukharev is that both public and sellers became so frivolous that these images remained uncovered in the showcases during the Great Lent, which is the most important fasting season in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The period not only of abstinence from certain foods, but intensified private and public confession and self-examination, restitution for committed sins. Thus for deacon I. Bukharev *Nana* leads the numerous images of lust and sin and has no right to be placed at the museum. But at the same time he witnesses that it is very popular. Among disapproval statements we notice the changes in public: women visited Kuznetsov Bridge along with men, young people became freer to express their feelings and speak about love in public. A lot of new literature was published not only in books, but in periodicals. In fact, deacon I. Bukharev finished his essay criticizing moral values of the first *Nana*, Émile Zola's novel, along with many others. From this we may state that the appearance of *Nana* on market was logical, as long as Nu became quite popular, but what was remarkable is that Marcel Suchorowsky brought this new and provocative plot to a completely new level.

Leading poet and essayist of the Russian emigration between the 1930s and 1950s Georgy Ivanov in his memoirs writes about two unequal groups of Petersburg aesthetes. A numerous one is, so to speak, "virgin" aesthetes. They are in search of the beauty and collect not very expensive stuff. As for the opposite group, he writes the following: "Another went to the 'panorama' of Suchorowsky's

Nana and *Nana's Daughter*, equally admiring the beauty of the forms of this 'Nu family', and the 'hellish technique of the artist'" (Ivanov 1994, 280). This thesis is remarkable in many ways, but first of all we notice that Georgy Ivanov is sure that every reader he addresses his thoughts to is familiar with *Nana* and its notoriety.

Nevertheless, the painting itself could not become so popular on its own. The second aspect why *Nana* gained such a glory was the painter's strategy and innovative approach in self-promotion.

After *Nana* was rejected by the Academic Council, Marcel Suchorowsky decided to make a personal exhibition. This was not new; a lot of famous painters made solo exhibitions of one painting if it was famous or remarkable in some way. From December 20, 1881, *Nana* was shown at the exhibition hall of G. I. Hansen's house (on the corner of Nevsky Prospekt and Malaya Konyushennaya 26/16) daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. (which was possible only with the use of electric lighting, a technical innovation of that time). The entrance ticket price was 30 silver kopecks, quite an expensive price at that time (according to historical data, 1 kg of wheat flour cost 2 kopecks). The success of the exhibition was incredible. Sixteen thousand people came to see *Nana* during a month and a half. It was more popular than regular salons at the Imperial Academy of Arts and exhibitions of Peredvizhniki. In February 1882, the painting moved to Moscow and was placed in a separate hall on the Petrovsky lines. The entrance fee for the exhibition was raised to 50 kopecks (Severyuhin 2008b, 431).

Nana's composition is simple (Picture 1). The young courtesan is depicted naked laying in a seductive pose on a sofa, as embodied female's viciousness and lust. To enhance the effect of his work, Suchorowsky demonstrated it with carefully supplied lighting and elements of the dioramas (or, as it was called back then, "panorama"). The room



Picture 1. Marcel Suchorowsky. *Nana*. 1881.
Oil on canvas. Private collection

was decorated with velvet draperies and items common for a stylish boudoir. Pink satin shoes were thrown down on the carpet in front of the painting as if they have fallen from it. Exhibition was often accompanied with music. In a short review of Georgy Ivanov we may also notice that the efforts of Marcel Suchorowsky not only to show the painting but also to create the atmosphere were known and memorable. Thus, he notes, "Part of the "dessu" [underwear] whimsically scattered around the beauty's bed was drawn, part was the real ones" (Ivanov 1994, 280–281). These attributes were very carefully made; it was not possible to distinguish them even from the first row. All these turned the exhibition into a great show.

After Moscow, the picture was shown in Europe, where it was also exhibited in the manner of a show, first in Warsaw, then Paris, and in 1884 it came to London. It was exhibited at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly (Douglas-Fairhurst 2015, 304). We may see if the painting was accepted differently in Europe from a few episodes. Lewis Carroll had been recommended to visit the exhibition by a friend and left interesting notes about it: "It is a very life-like picture of a reclining woman, nude, except for a little drapery covering one leg from her knee to foot; it would have been better entirely nude, but even so rather 'French' in feeling" (quoted by Woolf 2010, 85). Carroll's biographer Jenny Woolf thinks that the writer did not like the picture at all, he only admitted it was racy. As for whether it was considered to be vulgar, Woolf says: "Carroll had satisfied himself that *Nana* was not actually indecent [...]. For him, *Nana* stayed on the right side of the line". At the same time, French academic and critic Hugues Lebaillly describes public protests organized by the *Art-Journal*, as they considered the picture too sensual and thus disgusting. The protestors invoked authorities, who looked after England's morals, to take some actions about that hotbed of vice.

With all that controversial fame, the exhibition had a great success; about half a million tickets were sold. According to Dmitriy Severyuhin, in London this artwork was bought by the American businessman J. F. Sutton from Baltimore, Texas, for 42 thousand rubles (Severyuhin 2008b, 431). Donald Vogel states that "John Frederic, an American impresario, began displaying *Nana* to huge paying crowds in the mid-1880s. It was inherited and similarly displayed by John's son Harry through the 1930s, when it disappeared from public view" (Vogel 2000, 214). We may suggest that J. F. Sutton refers to John Frederic, as long as *Nana* was owned by the Sutton family till the 1970s.

According to Dmitriy Severyuhin's calculations, 42 000 rubles was approximately equivalent to 4500 pounds sterling or cost of 33 kilograms of pure gold. It was the record fee ever received by the Russian artist for the painting that brought Suchorowsky the glory of the most highly paid artists of St. Petersburg. With this honorarium, the painter was able to purchase a twenty-room apartment in St. Petersburg and a summer house in Narva (Severyuhin 2008b, 431). Suchorowsky continued to use his successful strategy to fasten his reputation. He continued to exhibit upscale erotic paintings in the salon style and finished the epic art saga with *Nana's Daughter* exhibited after the painter's death in 1908. However, the glory did not last. Nowadays Suchorowsky's paintings are rare and kept mostly in private collections; they are displayed very seldom and are mainly known in reproductions and remarks of old critics.

From numerous periodic and especially exhibit advertizing flyers (some of which one may buy at eBay nowadays) we know that *Nana* travelled around the USA and Europe since the 1890s till the 1930s.

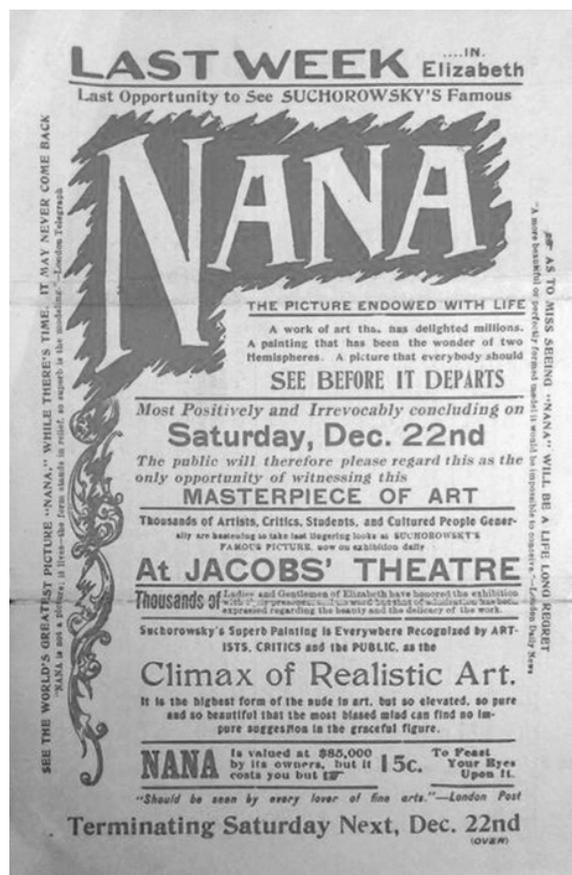
Nana made a big tour all over the United States in the 1890s and 1900s. From one of the oldest press reports, we know that *Nana* was exhibited at Whitney Hall in Detroit, Michigan (141 Woodward Avenue) since May 4, 1893. Local press mentioned that "it has been fifteen months in the United States, and wherever it has been exhibited it has been seen by thousands, one and all proclaiming it to be the most life-like study ever beheld" (Detroit Free Press 1893, 9). The USA press mentioned it was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 (Sioux City Journal 1908, 6). It is possible, as long as the fair finished October 30, 1893. Later *Nana* made the first visit to Houston, Texas in 1894, where it was exhibited in Grand Opera House (The Houston Post 1907, 10).

We may suggest that exhibitions continued moving from South to East as long as *Nana* "captures" Trenton, New Jersey in January, 1898. The exhibition took place at Masonic Temple building (10 West State Street). Local press stated that "Nana has been all around the world and was one of the most talked of features in Boston [Massachusetts], during which time over 125,000 viewed it" (Trenton Evening Times 1898, 6). A few months later, in June, it was brought to Allentown, Pennsylvania to Assembly Hall (17 South Seventh Street). Local newspaper *The Allenton Leader* emphasized: "There is nothing obscene about the picture and wherever it has been placed on exhibition it has been viewed and admired by ladies of the highest classes" (The Allenton Leader 1898, 1). This visit was remarkable and "created

heir Mr. Sutton, who lived in Beaumont, Texas and owned a car agency, decided to sell the painting and contacted artist Donald Vogel, the founder of Valley House Gallery, for mediation. But first *Nana* was brought to Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth, Texas) for the condition report. It obviously needed to be cleaned and lined. Restorer Perry Huston made a great job on it. He removed old varnish and also put it on a new stretcher.

After restoration was finished, in 1978 Valley House Gallery arranged a special solo exhibition at Amarillo Art Center in Amarillo, Texas. The idea was to recreate “panorama” invented by Suchorowsky. *Nana* was once again dressed in red velvet and placed on a raised platform in bright lighting. The advertizing was in the style of the 1900s using bold letters and the Imperial Russian insignia. Donald Vogel recalls that “to complete the event, a barker placed back and forth beckoning the crowd as he cried out: ‘She all but lives! She all but breathes! Two bits for a ticket to see the Unforgettable, the Wonder of the Art World, NANA!’” (Vogel 2000, 214). It was very well-aimed way to return *Nana* in public view.

It took long to sell *Nana*, but eventually it was purchased by Margaret and Trammell Crow. They were building a new high tower at the Anatole Hotel in Dallas, Texas (2201 Stemmons Freeway). Hotel first opened in 1979 as the Loews Anatole Hotel and was a part of Wyndham Hotels owned by the Crow family. In 1981, the named renovation took place, and it became the largest hotel in the South until the late 1990s. Besides the other notations, a fabulous restaurant on the top of the 27th floor was built. They called it the *Nana Room*, so the painting became some kind of “a landmark, the most travelled and gorgeous bar painting in the world” (Vogel 2000, 215). Restaurant was later known as *Nana Grill* and then simply *Nana*. The Anatole Hotel soon became famous sightseeing in Dallas due to its art collection: “The elegant interior displays priceless Asian art from the private collection of Margaret and Trammel Crow in addition to *Nana*, an 1881 Gospodin Marcel Gavriel Suchorowsky portrait of a reclining nude” (10Best Dallas 2006, 15). In 2005, the hotel was re-branded as the Hilton Anatole as management



Picture 3. Advertising flier, ?1928–1934

changed. But it was still owned by the Crow family, and *Nana* was still on the top.

In June, 2012, *Nana* restaurant was closed because it was decided to move to the *Sēr* concept. Before restaurant was reorganized painting *Nana* was “actually sold to a restaurant in Colorado for a reported 3 million dollars just months ago” (Doyle 2012), and *Nana* at the restaurant was replaced by its reproduction. The current location of painting *Nana* by Marcel Suchorowsky is not defined.

Nana's story is notable, first of all, due to its cultural perception. It became known not only as the concept of a certain type of public taste in entertainment but also as an outstanding piece of art. The history of its exhibitions exposes interesting peculiarities of art and society relations and specific art market features.

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«НАНА» МАРЦЕЛІЯ СУХОРОВСЬКОГО: ІСТОРІЯ НАЙДОРОЖЧОЇ КАРТИНИ РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ІМПЕРІЇ

У статті описано історію картини Марцелія Гавриловича Сухоровського (1840–1908) «Нана» (1881), відомої як найдорожча картина, продана художником у Російській імперії. Її сюжет запозичений зі скандальної новели Емілія Золя «Нана» про долю паризької куртизанки (перша редакція вийшла друком у періодиці у 1879–1880 рр.). На полотні розміром 1,7 x 2,8 м зображена оголена молода пані, що лежить на шовку і хутрі у фешенебельному будуарі. Картина виділяється у загальній ситуації на місцевому художньому ринку, який контролювали спеціальні легітимуючі установи, як-от Імператорська Академія мистецтв у Санкт-Петербурзі. М. Сухоровський набув скандальної слави еротичного художника. Значну роль у цьому відіграла оригінальна манера експонування твору у вигляді «панорами»: картину прикрашали драперії, завдяки спеціальному освітленню і реальним об'єктам, розміщеним у кімнаті, створювався ефект тривимірного простору.

У статті здійснено критичний аналіз картини, історії її сюжету, індивідуальної та інноваційної стратегії художника. Простежено історію експонування полотна у 1981–2012 рр. Спеціальним джерелом аналізу стали публікації в пресі США, вони дають змогу простежити рух «Нани» та громадський інтерес до цієї картини. Завдяки оригінальному методу експонування вона стала популярною розвагою. «Нана» є дуже цікавим культурним явищем, оскільки вона набула горезвісної слави завдяки поєднанню провокаційного сюжету і майстерної академічної техніки. Однак у дослідженні історії цього твору важливою є не лише ціна, але й передусім реакція громадськості. Завдяки обраній стратегії зображення та презентації твору Марцелій Сухоровський не лише став комерційно успішним незалежним художником (нехай і сумнівної слави), але і його твір буквально став *nomen appellativum* для означення певного низького типу культурної розваги з еротичним підтекстом, яка водночас сприймалась як масово-інтелектуальна.

Ключові слова: «Нана», Марцелій Сухоровський, реалізм, панорамна виставка, художній ринок.

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