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## **PAINTINGS THAT REFLECT THE ERA: A REVIEW OF ILYA RIPYN'S WORKS**

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Ilya Ripyn is one of the most prominent figures in Ukrainian and Russian art of the late 19th century. His work goes beyond simple artistic depiction and delves into a deep analysis of national identity, social realities, and cultural processes. In today's world, which faces numerous challenges related to national identity and cultural conflicts, Ripyn's works take on new relevance. Through his realism, he not only documents the social and political realities of his time but also serves as an important source for researchers trying to understand the complex dynamics and influences on cultural identity.

The correct spelling of the artist's surname is Ripyn, as this is how he signed his works. Moreover, the surname has Cossack roots, as one of his relatives bore the nickname Ripa. Therefore, the version "Repin" is a Russian-adapted form of the surname [1].

The paintings of realist artists hold significant ethnographic value, as they offer visual and accurate depictions of folk life. Realism as an artistic movement is based on the truthful and objective portrayal of reality, making the works of realists extremely useful for studying folk culture. The canvases of realist artists such as Kostyantyn Trutovsky, Petro Martynovych, Mykola Pymonenko, and Ilya Ripyn provide ethnographers with detailed representations of folk traditions, clothing, architecture, and physical features of various regions [10].

Ilya Ripyn, as a prominent representative of realist painting, left a significant legacy that reflects Ukrainian folk culture of the second half of the 19th century. His paintings are an important source for studying Ukrainian everyday life, as he employed a realist method, creating sketches from life and transferring them to his canvases. This allowed for the depiction of daily life in its various aspects [10]. Ripyn's artistic approach was characterized by genre diversity. His paintings include portraits and self-portraits, genre scenes, still lifes, landscapes, historical works, and pieces on religious themes.

The most intriguing studies highlight the artist's connections with Ukraine. His canvases, which depict traditional women's costumes, are noted for their vividness and color. In a letter to V. Stasov, Ripyn expressed his admiration for the beauty of Ukrainian women's clothing, stating: "How charming! What enthusiasm! ... Only Ukrainians and Parisiennes truly know how to dress with taste! You wouldn't believe how wonderfully the girls adorn themselves..." He concluded: "And what pendants and necklaces! What headpieces and flowers! What faces! And the language! Simply glitter, glitter, glitter!" [13, p.6].

Influenced by the Italian paintings of Léon Bonnat, Ripyn created a series of paintings depicting Ukrainian women. The first of these, "Ukrainian Woman" (Appendix No.1), shows a girl thoughtfully leaning on a fence. Her hands, face, necklace around her neck, and head adorned with wildflowers are beautifully rendered. The painting depicts the complex traditional female costume of Poltava region: an embroidered shirt, a petticoat, a belt, a skirt, ornaments, and a headdress [10].

In 1889, Ripyn painted a portrait of Sofiya Mykhailivna Dragomirova, the daughter of the Kyiv governor-general, in Ukrainian folk attire (Appendix No. 2). The portrait depicts a green skirt with red woolen tassels, a sleeveless bodice, silver and gold crosses, a necklace, and a violet headscarf. This ensemble of folk clothing is characteristic of the Sumy and Poltava regions [10].

A prominent aspect of I. Ripyn's work is the Cossack culture of Ukraine, which, in the second half of the 17th and early 18th centuries, became a symbol of all things Ukrainian. Ripyn, as one of the leading artists of his time, popularized the Zaporizhian theme. The painting "Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan" (Appendix No.3) stands out as a kind of encyclopedia of Cossack attire. The canvas vividly presents various elements of Cossack clothing and military equipment. Ripyn meticulously depicted Cossack coats, kaftans, headgear, and belt clothing, including sharovary (wide trousers) tucked into boots. The painting also features a Cossack in a red coat with a gilded belt and various Cossack headgear with Eastern influences [10].

The history and creation of Ilya Ripyn's masterpiece "Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan" are well-known and thoroughly analyzed by art historians. The story goes that the letter depicted in the painting was written in 1676 by Cossack Hetman Ivan Sirko on behalf of the entire Zaporizhian Army in response to an ultimatum from Ottoman Sultan Mehmed IV. This message, expressed in a rather resolute form, urged the Cossacks to convert to Islam and join the Sultan's ranks. The original letter was lost, but in the 1870s, the Dnipro-based amateur ethnographer Y.P. Novytsky discovered a possible 18th-century copy. He gave this copy to the renowned Ukrainian historian D.I. Yavornytsky, who, according to

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witnesses, read it as a curiosity to his guests, including Ilya Ripyn. The artist became intrigued by the story and began creating preliminary sketches. According to another version, during a summer stay in 1878 at the estate of the industrialist and patron S. Mamontov in Abramtsevo, Ripyn heard about the letter from the conservatory professor O. Rubtsov. The first reaction to the story was likely laughter, which became the theme of Ripyn's painting [6, p.12].

In the winter of 1880, Ripyn visited Saint Petersburg several times to seek advice from the renowned historian M. Kostomarov about his travel route. Kostomarov provided him with the necessary information. Ripyn later recalled that he traveled "along the Dnipro, to the sites of the former Zaporizhian Sich, as indicated by Kostomarov" [10]. Ripyn noted that he used books by Antonovych and Drahomanov to study Ukrainian culture and everyday life, and he was particularly captivated by Ukrainian epic literature [5, p.107].

In the Pokrovsk Church in the Nikopol region, watercolor copies of two Zaporizhian Cossacks, made from a portrait by an unknown artist from 1784, were preserved. Ripyn created pencil and watercolor sketches of these copies, which were later published in D.I. Yavornytsky's book "Zaporizhzhia in the Remnants of Antiquity and Folk Traditions" (1888) [10].

In Kapulivka, where the Chortomlyk Sich once stood, he documented the grave of Hetman I. Sirko and made sketches of Ukrainian peasants. In Hrusivka, he was interested in the wooden bell tower and church. In Mykolayivka, he created sketches of Hetman D. Apostol's portrait and his military equipment. In Stari Kaidak, he depicted the cliffs above the Dnipro River and the church [5, p.108].

This journey allowed Ripyn not only to study the places he intended to depict but also to meet the descendants of the Zaporizhian Cossacks. During his stay in the Zaporizhian lands, he even conducted archaeological excavations, uncovering the skull of a Zaporizhian Sich warrior. This unique find was depicted in several of the artist's paintings, highlighting his attention to accurate representation.

In August 1880, Ripyn visited the estate of V. Tarnovskyi in Kachanivka, where he discovered a rich collection of Cossack antiquities. He used these materials to create a portrait of V. Tarnovskyi in an 18th-century Zaporizhian cherkesska. Tarnovskyi's collection, which included over 900 items, was a significant resource for the artist, and its value has since increased, as it was partially destroyed during World War II [5, p.108].

In 1887, Ripyn met Ukrainian historian D. Yavornytsky, who was conducting research on the Zaporizhian Sich. Yavornytsky, possessing a vast collection of Cossack artifacts and historical materials, became an important source of information for Ripyn. Together, they searched for remnants of Cossack antiquities. In one village, the artists spent over a month, and according to Ripyn, a legend soon

emerged that they were searching for treasure [6, p.22]. This contact allowed the artist to delve deeper into the subject and provided him with access to numerous sources necessary for creating a historically accurate depiction.

Ripyn considered accurate representation of characters to be a key aspect of his work. He collected numerous sketches and portraits of types, which he used to create the Cossack figures in his paintings. Yavornytsky helped him find real-life prototypes among individuals such as the writer V. Hilyarovskiy, the artist F. Stravinsky, and painters M. Kuznetsov and Y. Tsioglinsky [11, p.208]. Approaching portraits with great attention, Ripyn sought to avoid mere likeness, aiming instead to capture the character and spirit of each individual.

As noted by Zhyrkevych, who posed for Ripyn for this painting, the artist used photographs, sketches, and descriptions, which indicates his attention to historical accuracy. The painting is the result of extensive work by the artist in studying ethnographic and historical sources, which gave it significant authenticity and ethnographic value [5, p.108].

The emotional aspect of his research was equally important to Ripyn. In his letters, Ripyn described his admiration for the Zaporizhian people, noting their deep sense of freedom and brotherhood. This admiration also reflected in his work, where he sought to represent not only historical facts but also the spiritual essence of the Cossacks. Ripyn seemed to relate the "Zaporizhian Cossacks" to the folk humor culture of the Middle Ages, which at that time was distinct from official culture [7, p.8].

Reflecting on his background, Ripyn mentioned that although he was not a Cossack himself, his family had Cossack origins, and he retained many aspects of the free Cossack tradition in his culture. He had learned a lot about the Cossacks from older relatives who recounted the final days of Cossack life [9]. In a letter from 1889 to his friend, the writer Nikolai Leskov, Ripyn remarked that the Cossacks were not coarse and uneducated people but rather "the intellectuals of their time," and "most of them were educated." The artist emphasized that, in depicting the Cossacks, he saw them as embodiments of "freedom, equality, and brotherhood" [14].

Ilya Ripyn's enthusiasm for the Zaporizhian Cossacks remained consistently high over the years, despite his concerns that his passion might be perceived as supporting separatist ideas. As noted by Thomas Primak, Ripyn often faced criticism from nationalists, such as Mikhail Katkov, who was responsible for the ban on the Ukrainian language in the empire.

Ilya Ripyn's daughter, Vera, recalled that during their stay in Moscow, her father actively researched Ukrainian history. "Almost every day, Papa read verses aloud [to us] in Ukrainian: 'On the Three Brothers' [and other epics]... At that time,

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he painted his picture... We had gradually come to know all the heroes, Otaman Sirko with his grey whiskers..., Cossack Holota 'who feared neither fire, nor sword, nor swamp'... There was Taras Bulba with [his sons] Ostap and Andrii, and Vakula the blacksmith. Papa modeled the figures of the Zaporozhians from yellow clay, Taras Bulba and the others. Some have been preserved to this day" [13, p.10].

In a letter to V. Stasov, Ilya Ripyn wrote: "Damn people! No one in the world has ever felt freedom, equality, and brotherhood so deeply. Zaporizhzhia has always remained free and unconquered." In a letter to D. Yavornytsky, the artist also expressed his admiration for the Cossacks, calling them "true knights who knew how to fight for their freedom and for the oppressed people" [8].

Ripyn's painting "The Zaporizhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Turkish Sultan," completed in 1891, became an epic canvas, striking with its energy and detail. The painting depicts more than sixteen Cossack figures in historical costumes, including both real models and imagined characters. The painting was purchased by Tsar Alexander III for 35,000 rubles, a record sum paid for a painting at that time [10, p.11]. Although the painting was well received in Ukraine and even influenced folk art, official restrictions of the time restrained open discussion about it [13, p.13].

Ripyn also paid significant attention to the theme of revolutionary movements. One of such works is the painting "Not Expected" (Appendix No.4), which became a masterpiece. This painting, inspired by the amnesty of political prisoners on the occasion of Alexander III's coronation, depicts the return of a former political prisoner to his home after a long exile. The reactions of his family—from shock to the joyous delight of his son—are conveyed with great drama. On the wall of the room, where many paintings are hung, one can see a portrait of Shevchenko [13, p.14].

One of the most significant portraits by Ripyn is the oil painting of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko (Appendix No.5), created in 1888 and currently housed in the Shevchenko Museum in Kyiv. In the early 20th century, the artist was invited to join the commission responsible for erecting a monument to Shevchenko in Kyiv to mark the poet's 100th birthday. Ripyn prepared several drafts for the monument. Ukrainian artist Vyacheslav Rozvadovsky planned to create a postcard, with proceeds from its sale intended to fund the monument's construction. To this end, Ripyn painted a watercolor of "Prometheus" (Appendix No.6) from the Kobzar's poem "Caucasus" and also became a founding member of the Union for the Protection of Shevchenko Monuments, though its charter was never approved by the authorities. Ripyn highly valued Shevchenko's work and referred to him as the "apostle of freedom" [8].

Taras Shevchenko's name appears multiple times in the letters of Ilya

Yefimovich Ripyn in various contexts. In a letter to Pavel Tretyakov, Ripyn asks: "Here is my request to you: what color were Taras Shevchenko's eyes? Please check and let me know as soon as possible. Locals have commissioned me to paint his portrait for the hut by the Dnipro, which stands near his grave in the steppe... Recently, there was a portrait of him here, I looked at it, admired it, but I forgot the color of his eyes—seems like they were brown?" [4, c.1162].

Ilya Ripyn's painting "Cossacks on the Black Sea" (Appendix No.7), initially titled "Cossacks on the Dnipro," is a vivid example of his fascination with Ukrainian history and Cossack culture. The subject of this work was inspired by a Ukrainian epic from the late 16th century that describes Cossack campaigns to the Turkish shores. Ripyn masterfully conveys the indomitable spirit of the Cossacks, their zest for life, and their confidence even in the face of mortal danger. The canvas depicts a "chaika" boat rising on the waves, surrounded by splashes and foam. The Cossacks on the boat react to the danger in various ways: some pray, others laugh, while the bandurists sing, reflecting the diversity of their characters in a critical moment. Ripyn aimed to capture the individual psychological traits of each Cossack, showcasing both their sorrow and despair, as well as their optimism and resilience that help them face the elements [10].

In 1926, Ilya Ripyn conceived the painting "Hopak" (Appendix No.8), but due to his severe physical condition, it was extremely difficult for him to work. His right arm was nearly paralyzed and barely moved. In a letter to Dmytro Yavornytsky, Ripyn wrote: "For about three weeks, I felt very unwell, but despite this, leaning on furniture and walls, I did not abandon the work—I crawled and pulled myself along... The painting is turning out beautiful and cheerful" [12].

"Hopak" also contains deep symbolism. Ripyn considered this work a continuation of his earlier pieces about the Cossacks. The Hopak dance holds significant national and cultural meaning, serving not only as a dance but also as a martial art that symbolizes freedom and strength. While the painting features fewer figures than the renowned "Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan," each figure is dynamic and symbolic. The expressionist style highlights the fluidity of movements that represent the free spirit of Ukrainian Cossacks. The dance scenes reflect the connection between generations and embody the archetypes of national culture. Specifically, the dancer with the kobza evokes the image of Cossack Mamai, a well-known folklore hero [3, p.51].

Before his death, the artist was so absorbed in his creative process that even in a state of forgetfulness, he continuously moved his left hand, believing he was working on his final painting. He murmured, "Even the hundred-year-old grandfather went squatting. They've had a drink, hopping around. A cheerful landscape all around: just as it was" [12]. Ripyn saw this painting as a sort of "farewell

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message" to Ukraine — a symbol of the nation of free people [3, p.52].

Ripyn's paintings "The Religious Procession in the Kursk Province" and "Barge Haulers on the Volga" create an atmosphere distinct from his works on Ukrainian themes. According to O. Pronkevich's interpretation, rather than depicting national identity, Ripyn focuses on the decline and degradation of another nation. He portrays a society unable to unite and, as a result, unable to function successfully as a nation (Appendices No.9 and No.10) [3, p.52].

The sight of barge haulers on the Neva River in 1868, while Ripyn was still studying at the Academy of Arts, inspired him to create sketches that eventually became the painting "Barge Haulers on the Volga." He was struck by the contrast between the carefree life of people strolling along the river and the harsh labor of the barge haulers, whom he depicted as "draught animals." Despite mixed reviews after the painting's presentation at the Academy of Arts in 1873, it gained recognition at international exhibitions in Vienna and Paris [11, p.206]. In his reflections, Ripyn wrote: "What a horror it is, I say quite directly. – People are harnessed instead of cattle!" [8].

In "The Procession in the Kursk Province", the figures appear oppressed, their faces showing sadness and despair. The bright clothing of the priests and the landowner only make the difference between the common people and those in power more noticeable. The beggars and disabled people trying to get close to the icon seem to represent hopelessness rather than faith. The painting received mixed reviews: praised as one of the best examples of modern art by progressive critics, but criticized by conservative media for making fun of and mocking religious rituals [2, p.60]. Unlike "The Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan," where each character has a unique personality, the people in this procession blend into a featureless crowd.

A similar impression is created by "Barge Haulers on the Volga": only one barge hauler looks directly at the viewer, while the others have their eyes lowered, as if resigned to their fate. Against the backdrop of the river's vast expanse, they appear alienated and oppressed, highlighting the overall atmosphere of hopelessness and state oppression.

These works reflect the theme of "silent slavery." Both paintings depict oppressive, desolate landscapes: in "Barge Haulers on the Volga," the nearly empty scenery contrasts sharply with the desolation of the figures, while in "The Procession," a cloud of dust, which Ripyn added later, becomes a key part of the painting. This change shifts the focus from the icon to the people in the crowd [3, c.52].

The painting "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581" (Appendix No.11) is one of the most striking and significant works by Ilya Ripyn. It

depicts the tragic moment in Russian history when Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible fatally injured his son Ivan during a heated argument. The painting is notable not only for the dramatic nature of the event but also for its deep psychological portrayal of the characters. Ripyn effectively captures the complex psychological state of the father, making the painting particularly expressive and tense. This work, like "The Cossacks," contrasts the violence and oppression of Russian history with the freedom and spirit of Ukrainian history, deliberately highlighting the differences between the two [14, p.21].

The painting was shown at the XIII Traveling Exhibition and created a huge sensation. People in Petersburg were amazed, and mounted police had to be stationed outside to keep order. The building where the painting was displayed was packed with people, including not just ordinary folks but also young progressives and intellectuals, who praised it. However, the painting also angered conservative groups because of its graphic depiction of the tsar's murder [2, p.62].

Therefore, Ilya Ripyn, one of the most significant artists of his time, remains an invaluable resource for researchers. Working in a realistic style, Ripyn depicted both historical events and the social and cultural aspects of his era with great detail and accuracy. His paintings serve as important documents that illustrate the complex processes of national identity formation, social conflicts, and cultural stereotypes.

#### Appendices:

1.



Ilya Ripyn "Ukrainian Woman", 1875

2.



Ilya Ripyn "Sofia Dragomirova in Ukrainian dress", 1889

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3.



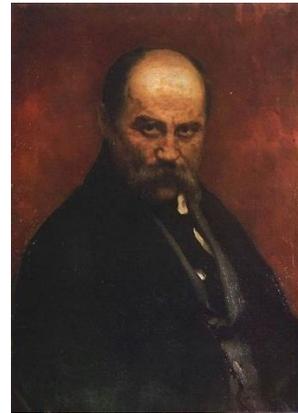
**Ilya Ripyn "Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan", 1889 – 1896**

4.



**Ilya Ripyn "Not Expected",  
1884-1888**

5.



**Ilya Ripyn "Portrait of Taras  
Shevchenko", 1888.**

6.



**Ilya Ripyn "Prometheus", 1888**

7.



**Ilya Ripyn "Cossacks on  
the Black Sea", 1910**

8.



**Ilya Ripyn "Hopak", 1926**

9.



**Ilya Ripyn "The Procession in the Kursk Province", 1880-1883**

10.



**Ilya Ripyn "Barge Haulers on the Volga", 1870-1873**

11.



**Ilya Ripyn "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581", 1885**

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