
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

E. Rezvan, A. Teryukov

NICHOLAS OF RUSSIA TRAVELS TO THE EAST. I: CHINESE WATERCOLOURS ON PITH

In 1890, Nicholas, future Nicholas II of Russia, sets off on a Grand Tour. Before him the Orient, a land of miracles and mystery. Visiting Greece, Egypt, India, Ceylon, Singapore, Java, Siam, China and Japan, travelling back through Siberia, Nicholas brought from each land rich gifts, commemorative items and works of art.

Most of what he brought back, including both official gifts and personal acquisitions, is now in Peter the Great

Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Russian Academy of Sciences. Taken together, this fascinating collection presents a picture of the last Russian Emperor totally different from and yet complementary to the romantic view created by a series of books and films over the course of the 20th century. It reveals his personal outlook, his tastes and preferences, his strengths and his numerous weaknesses.

Nicholas's Tour

For the first time since 1837 the heir to the throne of Russia — the world's largest country — set off on an extensive international tour. His status was such that much intense diplomatic effort was put into drawing up the itinerary. Like Peter the Great's "Great Embassy" of 1697—8, when the monarch travelled across Northern Europe meeting kings and gaining hands-on experience of many skills valuable to his country, the aim of the tour was to strengthen contacts between Russia and foreign lands: except that now the object of attention was the mysterious Orient.

Yet it all grew out of a purely Russian enterprise, a desire to familiarise Nicholas with the Far Eastern parts of his future territories. In 1890 his father, Alexander III, approved construction of the Great Siberian Railway and ordered Nicholas to represent him in Vladivostok at the ceremonial launch of works and symbolically push the first wheelbarrow.

The Crown Prince set off on 23 October 1890 and returned nearly ten months later on 4 August 1891. By then he had travelled 54,500 km, 16,000 of them by railway, 5,300 by carriage, 9,700 by river and 23,400 by sea.

Travelling from Russia to Trieste, Nicholas moved on to Greece and through the Mediterranean to Port-Said in Egypt. While the ships sailed along the Suez Canal, Nicholas and his companions — by now including Prince George of Greece — travelled along the Nile and back to view Egypt's great monuments. From the Suez Canal the Russian ships moved on to Bombay via Aden.

In India, Nicholas and Prince George set off overland: Bombay — Agra — Lahore — Amritsar — Benares — Calcutta — Bombay — Madras and then by sea to

Colombo (Ceylon). They admired the temple cut into a rock on Elephant Island, the Golden Temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar, and they met local rulers and hunted. In addition to their numerous purchases, they also received an abundance of presents — marvellously ornamented fabrics, silk shawls, weapons, miniatures with Indian landscapes and portraits of historical figures [1].

From Ceylon, the Russian ships with Nicholas and his suite on board sailed to Bangkok via Singapore and Batavia (Java). For a week Nicholas was the guest of King Rama V Chulalongkorn of Siam, a reformer whose role in Siam's history is often compared to that of Peter I in Russia. Nicholas and Rama V became firm friends: the Russian prince was awarded the highest Siamese order and given personal presents by the king. In 1897, Chulalongkorn was to visit St. Petersburg where one of his sons attended the elite school for boys, the Corps de Pages, and married a Russian girl. Russia also served as an intermediary in relations between Siam and France and it was thanks to Nicholas's intervention that Siam preserved its independence. From that time on the parade uniforms of officers in the Thai army were modelled on Russian uniforms of the early 20th century.

Thence Nicholas moved on to Nanjing via Singapore, Batavia (Java), Saigon and Hong Kong, sailing the Yangtze River on a ship of the Russian voluntary fleet, *Vladivostok*, to the town of Hangzhou. This was the site of a large tea-house belonging to Russia's biggest supplier of Chinese tea. Amongst the gifts Nicholas received there were different devices for tea-making and samples of all sorts of tea. This collection survives today, being preserved by keepers at the *Kunstkamera* throughout the terrible 900-day Siege of