

Chapter 4: “Art Classes and Law Exams”

Nicholas was very worried. He wanted to be a good and respectful son. He also wanted to follow his dream. He discussed his problem with his art teacher, who had realized that Nicholas’s talent was extraordinary.

“Mr. Mikeshin, I have such a problem. I want so much to be an artist, but my father has his heart set on my studying law!” exclaimed Nicholas. “What can I do?”

Mr. Mikeshin was thoughtful. Then his face brightened. “Nicholas, I have an idea!” he said. “Your father knows that you have always done many things at the same time. Why don’t you ask him if you can study at the art academy as well as the university?”

Nicholas pondered this suggestion. Maybe it would work! “I’ll try it,” he said.

Konstantin agreed to consider his son’s unique proposal. Nicholas was only eighteen years old! Yet Konstantin thought he could handle this dual enrollment. Finally he gave his approval. “But you must promise me, Nicholas,” he said, “that you will do both things equally well.”

It was a challenging compromise. But that was how Nicholas came to study art at the Academy of Arts and law at the Imperial University of St. Petersburg *at the same time*.

Soon the busy student was rushing from painting classes to law exams and back again. Nicholas once commented, “I suppose I’m fated to hurry all my life. I wonder if I’ll find time to die.”

Nicholas met his best art teacher almost by accident. After completing basic art classes, each student had to choose a specialty and a professor under whom to study until graduation. Nicholas wanted to study historical painting. Although that professor liked Nicholas’s work, his historical painting class was already full. So Nicholas had to specialize in landscape painting under Arkhip Kuinji instead.

Mr. Kuinji was once a shepherd boy. His time alone on the hills watching the clouds passing across the sky profoundly affected his art. His landscapes were meditative, his lighting unusual. He encouraged his students to use simple lines without excessive detail to create a feeling that land, sea and sky were one.

Nicholas still liked historical painting best, but under Mr. Kuinji he learned some important techniques. He learned to create beautiful landscapes in which the sky and the mountains merged.

Mr. Kuinji influenced Nicholas profoundly in many ways. Nicholas later wrote, “I was happy to have as my first teacher an extraordinary man. The eminent Master Kuinji was not only a remarkable artist, but also a great Teacher of life.”

Mr. Kuinji recognized his young student’s talent, his flair for ancient Russian subjects and his inexhaustible energy. Nicholas made remarkable progress in his studies under Mr. Kuinji, even as he took difficult law exams simultaneously.

One day Mr. Kuinji called Nicholas into his office. Nicholas wondered why his teacher looked so serious.

“Nicholas, I have to talk to you,” said Mr. Kuinji. Nicholas held his breath. Then his teacher’s face broke into a wide smile. “I am promoting you to the most advanced art class. This is the second promotion you have earned in a couple of months. This is really extraordinary, Nicholas!” Of course, Nicholas too was overjoyed.

Although he was tired from his schedule, Nicholas also did illustrations for art journals and for a university literary journal. But why would an exhausted student do extra work? He used the money he earned to pay for his art supplies. Since his father was still not in favor of his art studies (even though he supported Nicholas in other ways), Nicholas insisted on paying for his art supplies himself.

Finally it was time for Nicholas to begin his graduation project for the Academy of Arts. He still loved Russian history and spent his spare time in the public library, reading about the lives of Russian saints. As he sat among the dusty history books, wondering what to do as his graduation project, the books gave him an idea.

Nicholas’s project was a painting called *The Messenger: Tribe Has Risen against Tribe*. A dejected old man is sitting in a wooden boat being pushed by a man with a pole. This messenger is bringing the devastating news to a neighboring village that the tribes are at war. The scene is primitive, meditative and mysterious—inspired by ancient Russian history. Art critics and students loved it. *The Messenger* was bought for a world-famous art gallery in Moscow. And Nicholas finally earned the coveted title of artist.



Building the Ships
One of thousands of Nicholas' paintings

Activities

1. Go outside and watch the clouds and see what patterns and things you can see!
2. Make a drawing of what you see in the clouds.

Messina, Colleen. 2002. *Warrior of light: the life of Nicholas Roerich, artist, Himalayan explorer and author.*

Corwin Springs: Summit University Press.

Copyright © 2002 by Summit University Press and Colleen Messina