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Fallen Star

Mikhail Vrubel

Raymond Cavanaugh Jr

Mikhail Vrubel was born in 1856 in Omsk, Siberia. His father was a Russian army officer who supported the son's early-manifested interests in art, literature and music. Vrubel was well acquainted with the painting brush by the time he set off to St Petersburg University, where he studied law.

Though he performed adequately at his studies, Vrubel began to consider jurisprudence too straightforward a calling for one of his bohemian ilk and soon after graduating veered off the traditional career path, opting for the vicissitudes of the artistic life.

Not long after entering the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, he was recruited to assist with the revivification of holy icons at prominent area churches. It was this period that sparked the painter's long-time use of fiery and emotional colour combinations reminiscent of stained glass.

In 1889, Vrubel moved to Moscow where, while partaking in various artistic endeavours, he encountered Mikhail Lermontov's *Demon*. This poem became a lifelong obsession for Vrubel, who viewed the 'demon' as a heroic rebel, destined to remain 'tragically alone'. For the rest of his career, he would paint demons.

Vrubel's most prominent work is the *Seated Demon*, which portrays heaven's most famous exile not as the archetypal pitchfork-wielding maniac but as a contemplative-looking figure, calmly seated against an infernal background.

Though critics dismissed his *Seated Demon* as 'wild ugliness', the striking, if not entirely popular work won the ardour of art patron Savva Mamontov, who had the walls of his mansion and personal opera embellished by Vrubel's unconventional palette.

Known to be of melancholic temperament, the demon-chasing Vrubel was hospitalised for mental illness in 1902. During this time, he was observed repainting demons' faces many times over, an activity which may be construed as the artist's attempt to mask his own psychological turmoil.

One year after Vrubel's hospitalisation his son died. Following this event, the painter's added distress is manifested by his illustrated 'demons', which tend to appear increasingly tormented. Compounding Vrubel's problems was his steadily declining vision. Eventually, facing the prospect of blindness and the end of any future work, Vrubel descended into a vortex of suicidal ideation. One night in March 1910, he opened a window and, for a period of several hours, exposed his bare chest to the penetrating St Petersburg chill. One week later, he succumbed to pneumonia. However, not even death would end his misfortune, as the mysterious bronze powders he had used began to erode his painted oils and those hauntingly luminous achievements faded along with their creator's name.

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