

If truth is more interesting than fiction, then the story of an iconic fire painting's creation and disappearance is ripe for Hollywood: a starving Russian artist creates a masterpiece and becomes a success at home and abroad, only to lose it all, including the painting. The painting then becomes the subject of a mystery that involves a rogue's gallery of shady characters and one of America's most famous business families, and reaches into the halls of the White House and the Kremlin—all set against the backdrop of a century's worth of war and international politics.

UNTAMED ART

The world's most famous painting of a forest fire is also its most misidentified. Anyone even casually familiar with fire art or the least bit curious about pre-photographic images of wildland fires will recognize the scene instantly. The focal point is a slow-swirl pillar of flame rising through a patch of boreal

forest. The fire gathers in a ragged eddy along the forest floor before sweeping upward against the wind and twisting through the canopy with a convective heave and a reverse eddy of flame and smoke. The symmetries are nearly perfect: sky and earth balanced with a layer of mossy forest between them; the deep woods wedging to the center and there cleaved evenly by that archetypal spiral of flame.

The painting has been widely reproduced, and variations on its scene abound in various media, with varying internal proportions and sizes. Some versions insert fire-scarred pines; some even include a cottage and firefighters. You can find them in color lithographs hanging in kitchens, old garages, even a few bars, and bins at second-hand stores. The U.S. Forest Service has a black-and-white print in its historic photo collection. A Bavarian ceramics company reproduced it on porcelain plates. Pre-World War II Japan manufactured facsimiles using silken thread. Grandma Moses copied the scene, as have other American primitives. A Wisconsin woman won a folk art festival by submitting a variant she painted, fraudulently claiming she reproduced the image not from a reproduction on her living room wall but from real-world fires remembered from her youth. Others insisted that the scene commemorates the 1871 Peshtigo fire. More recently, versions have appeared on eBay amid various testimonies to authenticity ("original oil") and prices ranging up to \$850.

ARTIST IN THE URALS

All come from a common source, a painting by the Russian artist Aleksei Kuz'mich Denisov-Uralsky originally titled *Lesnoi pozhar* (*Forest Fire*). Aleksei Kuz'mich was born in Yetkaterinburg into a family descended from Old Believers¹; his father, Kuzma Osipovich Denisov, was a miner turned dreamer turned artist, who worked with mosaic reliefs, landscapes, and icons and made a reputation by constructing gigantic grottos from gemstones for display at Russian and international fairs. Aleksei Kuz'mich was trained to this same craft and had instilled in him that semi-precious stones, not the paintings use as exhibit backgrounds, were the essence of a good career. In 1882 father and son participated in the All-Russian Arts Industrial Fair in Moscow, where the son's mosaic paintings attracted special notice. Shortly afterwards Kuzma Osipovich died, leaving to Aleksei the task of supporting his mother and three sisters. He persisted in his craft, his artisanal skills winning further attention. In 1884 he received formal designation as a "master" for reliefs.²

His aching ambition, however, was to paint. For this he showed a talent as real and raw as the rough stones he reworked, although like them he needed cutting, polishing, and setting; so in 1887 (or 1888) he enrolled in the Drawing School of the Art Promotion Society at St. Petersburg. He was desperately poor. He studied diligently and exhibited successfully in Copenhagen and Paris,

BY STEPHEN J. PYNE

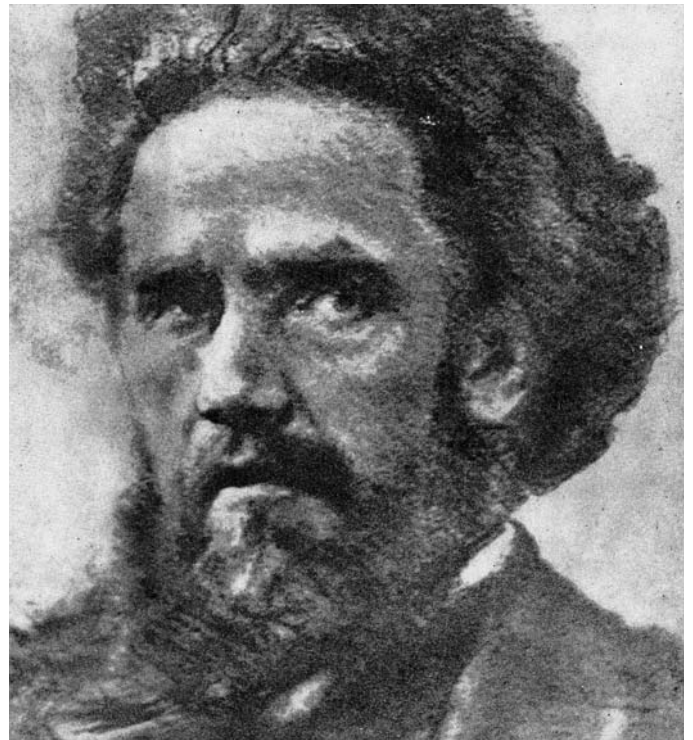
but lacked the funds to do the tasks properly. His mother and sisters, equally famished, pleaded with him to send money. Stomach warred with mind which warred with heart. At one point he is said to have contemplated suicide. In the end there was nothing for him but to return to Yekaterinburg, and make the Urals the subject of his art. These circumstances, unsought and unwanted, he turned to advantage.

He perceived the landscape differently from his more severely educated contemporaries. In particular he saw the Urals' forests aflame. For anyone committed to representing its indigenous scenery the topic would seem obvious: the boreal forest is a fire forest, its tempo of burning likely quickened in the late nineteenth century by the economic liberalization and industrialization, which broadened logging and threw sparks widely. Yet fire scenes were not a topic of academic interest, were not among the classics that students copied, were not a theme of beaux arts. Those who painted fires typically came from the ranks of the untutored—naïve recorders of the world as they actually saw it, not a world learned by imitation from Old Masters. They painted fire in defiance of official indifference because it was so vivid and prominent. Fire and Aleksei Kuz'mich thus found common cause: the one proposing a distinctive subject, and the other, bringing sufficient skill to render that topic into formal painting. There was a long tradition in Russian art of fire icons, of Elijah the prophet on his fiery chariot, an image cherished to protect dwellings from lightning and flame. But giant canvasses of burning woods bore no relation to tiny portraits of Elijah. Flames ripping through the Urals required a different imagination.

From his youth Aleksei Kuz'mich had been enthralled with nature's wonders. In that he differed little from most painterly contemporaries in an era aglow with landscapes. By temperament and circumstance he found himself among the amorphous second-generation school of Russian artists known as Wanderers, committed to folk themes, portraits, and especially natural scenery, and what evolved regionally into a Urals' version of America's Hudson River School. He committed to explore the mountains and record its scenes. What drove him to wrestle with flames was apparently a fascination, which began to haunt him, regarding "grand fires" that he had witnessed in his youth. Reportedly, he suffered nightmares about conflagrations from which he woke up suffocating and coughing; he worried that he might hallucinate outright about fires, and to check the growing obsession he determined "to become one with fire" by fighting against flames near Shartash Lake. Still, he doubted whether anyone could truly capture the grandeur and power of a free-burning fire in its full-throated roar.

Yet he tried, over and over, seeking to distill fire's essence through countless sketches and fully wrought paintings. He began with a study of a grass fire (*Burning Grass*) in 1887, and then escalated into the woods with a series of paintings all (confusingly) titled *Lesnoi pozhar* (*Forest Fire*). Some were details, some were immense panoramas too vast to hang on walls (one actually looks down on a full-blown crown fire). Most disappeared, often mysteriously. A wonderful story, apparently apocryphal, tells how

The 1897 fire painting. Note the flaring fire, but also note the effect of having that streak become a spiral, which is what provides the visual tension in Lesnoi pozhar.



Probable self-portrait, Aleksei Denisov-Uralsky. From Svetlana Semenova, Ocharovan Uralom. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo A. K. Denisova-Ural'skogo (Enchanted by the Urals).



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



the 1897 version vanished from Perm during the civil war until, in 1934, a Red Army detachment carried the enormous canvas into town, having reputedly hauled it with them for over a decade. An 1898–99 version disappeared after being exhibited in Moscow.

His real breakthrough, however, came with an exhibit, “The Urals in Art,” staged on December 26, 1900, in Perm. It was an age of impressionism, when artists were experimenting with light, and Aleksei Kuz’mich added to the effect of his latest *Lesnoi*



pozhar by displaying it in a single room with a solitary bulb. But exhibition lighting had less to do with the painting's appeal than his final mastery of a flame torching upward through the canopy. His earlier experiments had shown such flames running with the

The most common reproduction of *Lesnoi pozhar*, dated around 1904. The top of the original is cropped to fit the required dimensions of the paper. Almost all subsequent copies follow from this image, not the original.

wind; in this quintessential version, it backs against the wind even as it ascends, causing a slow swirl that fixes the painting exactly in two and seems to draw all into a visual vortex. Aleksei subsequently carried his entire exhibit to St. Petersburg where it enjoyed genuine success, with *Lesnoi pozhar* as a centerpiece. Soon afterwards he added "Uralsky" to Denisov as a nom de plume; in 1903, he helped found the Siberian Society of Wanderers. The climax to more than fifteen years of studied fire painting arrived when he sent the work—the synthesis of all his efforts to render flame into art—to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition (the St. Louis World's Fair), where it walked away with a "big silver medal," one of twelve awarded.³

More triumphs followed. By 1912 commercial success allowed him to establish his own store, primarily for semi-precious stones and jewelry, across the street from Faberge's in St. Petersburg; the imperial family was a frequent client. He donated funds to promote art in the Urals, sought to preserve the traditional crafts of ethnic groups in the region, and urged nature protection. His example inspired a virtual school of fire art through the works of L. N. Zukov, A. A. Sherementjev, N. M. Gushin, and I. I. Klimov, an organized corpus characteristic of no other country. Friends considered Aleksei a sociable personality, much given to good humor. But like that spiral of flame in his most famous painting, his moment of triumph was the outcome of peculiar, fleeting circumstances, and it was one that could not sustain itself.

Nemesis followed. He heard nothing, absolutely nothing, regarding the paintings he had sent for exhibition in St. Louis. (He was not alone; none of the artists knew what became of their works, and all were still protesting loudly at the Congress of Russian Artists when it convened in St. Petersburg in December 1911.) But the missing paintings were only a start. In short order both his mother and his son Nikolai died, and the Bolshevik revolution caught him in his Usekirka dacha, now within a newly independent Finland. He was isolated, geographically and emotionally. He felt "lost, forgotten, buried alive," one of the hordes of intellectual refugees the twentieth century spawned like flies.⁴

He labored from his lonely retreat to reestablish contact with Yekaterinburg—to found a museum of art, to arrange to donate some four hundred of his paintings, to promote his own repatriation. He failed. He remained marooned in Finland; his immense cache of paintings dissipated, and most vanished; even the iconic *Lesnoi pozhar*, to his knowledge, had disappeared without a trace. Queries regarding it went unanswered. Still in exile, his legacy apparently blown away like smoke, Aleksei Kuz'mich Denisov-Uralsky died in 1926.

FIRE AND FRAUD, ART AND ASHES

For decades afterwards rumors swirled in Russian historiography about the ultimate fate of *Lesnoi pozhar* and the other contributions to the 1904 exposition, all associated with shenanigans in America. It was destroyed by a ship fire while sailing to an American buyer; a fraudulent art dealer in St. Louis had exhibited

the work and never returned it; it was sold at auction to a mysterious collector, removed to Canada, and then to Argentina or otherwise lost when the paintings were dispersed, their artists uncompensated. The entire exhibit, it seemed, had vanished.

The true story exceeds those rumors: it is a sordid tale of war, politics, and fraud. It begins with efforts to entice Russia to participate in the 1904 exposition, which Russia did by arranging for a massive display of art, including some six hundred paintings and a pavilion to hold them that one critic likened to a “cross between St. Basil’s cathedral and a Hanseatic League warehouse,” shipped in sections for assembly on site in January 1904. Within a month Japan and Russia were at war, and sensing that popular American sentiment was hostile, Russia officially withdrew from the exposition and shortly afterwards dismantled the pavilion.⁵

At this point, Edward Mikhailovich Grunwaldt, a Russian fur merchant, councilor of commerce for the Ministry of Finance, and member of the Russian Aid Organization Committee for the Exposition, stepped into the breach, having previously assisted during a troubled French exhibit in Moscow in 1891. Officially, Russia had withdrawn from St. Louis; but Grunwaldt was allowed to continue the program as a private individual. He subsequently arranged contracts with each of the contributing artists in which he guaranteed that he would either sell their works or return them at his expense; if they sold, the artists would get seventy percent of the revenue. He invested some \$50,000 of his own wealth into the project and hastily pleaded for exhibit space. The collection arrived piecemeal and late and had to be housed in the second floor of the Central Arts Palace, all amid a relentless background of Japanese victories and American hostility. (Russia’s abandoned exhibit space had gone to Japan, which enlarged its own contributions, thus recapitulating its military triumphs).⁶

Still, the exhibition was massive and impressive, and among three special displays was one on “The Urals and Its Riches.” This was essentially Denisov-Uralsky’s old exhibit updated, a reconnaissance of the Urals from “the scientific, geographical, ethnological, geological, mineralogical, petrographical, and artistic points of view” on what was characterized as “Russian California” by its premier “Painter-Mineralogist.” There were studies of mountains, rivers, railway bridges, typical strata and minerals, mines and forests, all of which culminated in his masterpiece, *Lesnoi pozhar*. Such extensive burns were “the scourge of the Urals,” a threat to its metallurgical industries, and a scene begging artistic description. All in all, “The Urals and Its Riches” constituted one-tenth of the Russian exhibit of six hundred paintings. But the operatic fire painting, like a vast wild campfire, drew the greatest viewers and was praised as “most realistic and pictorial.”⁷

That aesthetic directness was its salvation. *Lesnoi pozhar* was reproduced as a Sunday supplement by the *Cleveland Leader* on December 4, 1904—this with permission from the French Commissioner of Fine Arts, under the auspices of the French exhibition. (How the French muscled into granting permissions is unclear, but probably connects to Grunwaldt’s previous experience with the 1891 French art exhibit in Moscow and his fur-traffic business in Paris, where his brother had an office as did two of his partners in arranging the Russian collection.) Even with French promotion, however, the Russian paintings did not result in either the anticipated major prizes or big sales. An inquiry followed from the Lumber Insurers’ General Agency to reproduce framed copies for distribution at national meetings—art to the

service of advertising and fire prevention. But the *Cleveland Leader* was not the critical acclaim Grunwaldt craved, nor promotion by the Lumber Insurers the kind of monetary return he sought.

Disappointed, Grunwaldt tried again, this time with official support, by shipping the entire exhibition to the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland, Oregon. When that scheme fell through, he decided to host his own exposition and shipped the entire exhibit to New York, a better art market and one for which he would not have to pay commissions to the exposition. In September 1905, with mediation from President Theodore Roosevelt, Japan and Russia ended their war by signing the Treaty of Portsmouth. Meanwhile, at a gala New York inaugural, attended even by Russia’s ambassador to the U.S., Grunwaldt opened “Russia’s First Fine Arts Exposition in America.” In effect, he would try to achieve in New York what he had hoped would happen in St. Louis. Exhibiting presented no difficulties—Grunwaldt had wisely secured advance permission from the Customs office. But selling the art did, and set into motion over the next eight years a prolonged legal battle in which fraud competed with fraud.⁸

Who owned the paintings? Grunwaldt implied they were his legal property, although he tried to evade customs duties (they could be exhibited but not sold without charge). On March 7 and 8, 1906, he managed to sell 137 works at prices far below expected values to private collectors and institutions. Then on March 10, the U.S. Treasury secretary intervened on behalf of both the Russian government and U.S. Customs to end further sales and confiscated the lot as “unclaimed merchandise” until Grunwaldt paid the full import duties (those items already sold paid their tariffs, including eight destined for the Toledo Art Museum).

Grunwaldt could not meet the full charge, and faced financial ruin. He owed \$50,000 and by now had invested an additional \$75,000 of his own money (in 2007 dollars, a tidy \$1.6 million). By May, Grunwaldt’s lawyer, Henry I. Kowalsky, a probate attorney from California, reported that he was destitute, living in a basement, and suffering ill health. Grunwaldt appealed to the Tsar for help, while Kowalsky attributed his client’s plight to American hostility toward Russia and to an incompetent auctioneer. (In August, Grunwaldt sued the Fifth Avenue Auction Rooms for \$53,206, claiming criminal incompetence. The appeals lasted until June 1909, when they were finally dismissed).⁹

Grunwaldt then prepared to return to Europe to confer with his brother who ran their Paris office. Before departing he agreed, for the sum of \$1, to “assign, sell, transfer and deliver” the full collection to Kowalsky apparently in the belief that the (apparently) politically connected lawyer and lobbyist could break the logjam at Treasury. But Kowalsky, in the words of Robert Williams, could “only be described as a professional rogue.” Among his other clients was King Leopold II of Belgium, until even that villain could stomach him no longer.¹⁰

When the warehouse bonds neared expiration, the Treasury Department prepared to sell the remaining paintings at auction. By now, the summer of 1907, the Russian government insisted that it was the legal owner, but declined to furnish an indemnity bond for the expected lawsuits. So although Russia claimed the paintings, it refused to take steps to assert its rights; Grunwaldt, returned from Europe, insisted the collection was his and hired another law firm; Kowalsky flourished his contract with Grunwaldt to assert his ownership; and the Treasury Department maintained possession, threatening public auction until the import

duties were paid. Kowalsky borrowed enough to arrange an indemnity bond with Customs and shipped the lot to Toronto where, in transit, ownership surreptitiously changed from Grunwaldt to Kowalsky. Kowalsky had obtained the money for this legerdemain by a personal loan, which he could not pay back. So he further wangled with another operator, Frank Havens, a developer in Oakland who was erecting an art museum. With a prospective tariff war between the United States and Canada looming, Kowalsky and Havens moved quickly in March 1910 to ship the collection to California.

Now the sad cycle repeated: Kowalsky claimed ownership, Havens held the bill of lading, and since the paintings were reentering the United States, the Treasury Department again demanded duties. The issue lay in limbo, partly paralyzed by the politics of the Taft administration, until February 1912, when Treasury sold the collection at public auction. The ownership question devolved into money: the only contestant with enough was Frank Havens. He purchased the entire exhibit for \$39,000. But Kowalsky sued and pulled strings, and with Treasury still holding the paintings in limbo until the courts and politicians decided, the matter eventually went to the desk of President Taft in April 1912. He agreed that the auction should proceed. The Russian Fine Arts Exhibition for the 1903 Louisiana Purchase Exposition became the property of Frank Havens.¹¹

As Robert Williams has aptly summarized this dismal saga,

The St. Louis Russian paintings disappeared into scattered private and museum collections in America after 1912 because of a series of ignorant and fraudulent acts by several individuals. In March 1906 Grunwaldt certainly tried to deceive both the artists in Russia and the American government by selling the paintings at auction without paying the tariff; artists had contracted with him to sell only certain paintings, and these at generally higher prices. The Russian ambassador tried to recover the paintings, made protests, but was unwilling in 1907 to pay the small charges and take the legal steps necessary to obtain them from the United States government. At this point two frauds were perpetrated upon both Grunwaldt and the Russian artists: Kowalsky shipped the paintings to Canada and took title away from Grunwaldt; and Frank Havens obtained the paintings from Kowalsky by purchasing them from the government at public auction, rather than accepting delivery of them on terms that would have included Kowalsky in the profits.

Kowalsky died shortly after the auction, Grunwaldt was ruined and died in 1915, and Havens fell into financial distress and had to sell his collection at auction in 1916 before dying in 1918. The Bolshevik revolution severed any lingering involvement by the Russian government. In the end, the Russian artists got nothing, and the paintings, other than those sold in New York, were blown to the four winds.¹²

WHITHER THE FOREST FIRE?

And *Lesnoi pozhar*? So far as the Russians knew, it was among the disappeared. Grunwaldt implied in letters that he had all the paintings in his possession when he arranged the exhibit and auction in New York over the winter of 1905–06. But *Lesnoi pozhar*, now identified by its English title *The Forest Fire*, was not listed among



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A variant, here with eastern European cottage and figures. This version retains the towering smoke column, but crops the lateral dimensions.

the confiscated merchandise, and was not among pieces registered for the auctions of 1907 and 1912. In fact, it had never left St. Louis. Shortly after it was reproduced for the *Cleveland Leader*, Adolphus Busch of beer brewing fame bought it and hung it in his mansion.

Busch was a likely buyer. He was on the exposition's Committee of Fifty, one of the largest subscribers to exposition stock, a member of the directory, and chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations. He and Grunwaldt would certainly have known each other, the Russian exhibition surely had Busch's support, and Grunwaldt would have been desperate for sales and perhaps hoped Busch might arrange for others on the Committee to help. For Adolphus Busch, the painting was a majestic souvenir of a successful enterprise; for Grunwaldt, a hopeful trophy sale, perhaps discounted in gratitude and expectation.¹³

The transaction had a commercial logic. After all, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, rather in keeping with its origins in a century-old land buy, had from its conception been a business



A Japanese reproduction in silk, probably from the 1920s.

proposition with little regard for those on the scene; now, *The Forest Fire*, had also passed hands, businessman to businessman, with little say from its creator. But the sale had its aesthetic logic as well. *The Forest Fire* was not among the paintings fawned over by professional critics or buyers; its artist was still a relative unknown outside certain Russian circles, and its subject completely outside the motifs of beaux arts. It was the kind of painting that, appealing to popular tastes, would be reproduced in Sunday supplements, handed out as advertising by insurance companies and later forestry associations, and purchased by a captain of industry who liked its gargantuan size and easily understood theme. It would get copied and capture public imagination, and so was spared the dismal exile of the Russian exhibition generally.¹⁴

Meanwhile, civic leaders in Dallas, Texas, enticed Adolphus Busch to erect a grand hotel commensurate with their municipal ambitions. The result was a Beaux Arts edifice, known as The Adolphus that opened in October 1912 and was for many years the tallest building in Texas. When the hotel was refurbished in 1926, *The Forest Fire* went to the foyer to add a touch of opulence, a kind of exalted if wild European grandeur, popular taste with an Old World cast and a heroic scale in keeping with its announced ambitions. (Its size and realism was such that it was said that one “must not stand too close because of the heat.”) The painting remained until the next refurbishing in 1950, when it was relocated to the Anheuser-Busch Brewery in St. Louis.

There it presided over the “Hospitality Room” and was subsequently viewed by tens of thousands of visitors through a haze of beer and cigarette smoke, a public exposure far greater than any it might have enjoyed in the Havens Gallery or the Toledo Art Museum.¹⁵

But even before it graced the Adolphus Hotel, it had become the best known of the Russian entries. The 1904 reproduction by American Colortype was joined by a 1909 edition. The lithograph was subsequently broadcast widely by the A. G. Voss Company under the title *The Untamed Element*. The Chicago *Sunday Examiner and America* promoted “exact reproductions” as a promotional feature for subscribers. The U.S. Forest Service included a black-and-white photo of this edition, somewhat cropped, in its historic photo collection and identified its source as A. G. Voss, May 18, 1949 (although the date may be a simple typo for 1909). The American Forest Association advertised reproductions as a “Sermon in Color” for its fire prevention campaigns. The painting propagated throughout rural America with an abandon entirely appropriate to its subject. Through its several published versions, *The Untamed Element* got into homes and workplaces. There, it has been copied again, and again, and again. There is no telling how many amateur artists have practiced their craft by reproducing the scene in their own idiom. Not a few have been cheeky enough to pass the work off as their own composition, or to suggest that their version in oils or acrylics might be the original.¹⁶



COURTESY OF ROBERT WILLIAMS

Historian Robert Williams and Forest Fire at the Anhaueser-Busch brewery in St. Louis. The scene inspired Williams to ferret out the story of the Russian exhibition paintings.

FANNING THE FLAMES

I have myself accidentally added to this tale of proliferation. While we were doing the raw research for *Fire in America*, my wife, Sonja, found a print at a second-hand store in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Then, Princeton University Press and I had difficulties agreeing on both a title and a jacket illustration. (The book was actually advertised prior to publication with a different title.) I wanted an image of a fire on the cover. At one point I proposed a Currier & Ives print of a prairie fire, but Princeton disapproved, so I argued for a wonderful forest fire painting I had collected. To spark interest I sent the black-and-white print from the Forest Service collection, which was eventually used for the inside title page.

But I insisted on a color version for the cover, so I hurriedly photographed my lithograph with 35mm slide film and sent the image to the press to show the possibilities, expecting that I would ship the print later. I didn't hear back; and then found they had reproduced the cover from the slide, as is, although reversed. Unfortunately, I had shot the image indoors with an incandescent bulb that cast a deep yellowish hue over the aging lithograph, rendering it both more vibrant and more sinister than the original. The paperback edition later issued by the University of

Washington Press, by focusing even more closely on that flawed image, distorted it further from the original. Only a handful of people would recognize in the book's cover that archetypal image from Denisov-Uralsky. So the saga continues.

WHITHER THE FOREST FIRE—PART II

And the original? An American historian of Russia, Robert C. Williams, spotted the painting at the Anheuser-Busch brewery in 1971, became interested in its provenance, and tracked down the sordid story of the Russian paintings at the exposition. An article he wrote attracted the attention of former Missouri Representative James Symington, then a lawyer in Washington, D.C., who urged August Busch Jr. to donate the painting to the U.S. government, which could in turn transfer it to the Soviets. Busch agreed, and in March 1979, Joseph Duffey, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, handed over *Lesnoi pozhar* to the Soviet embassy with all due ceremony and a round of vodka toasts.

Still, Busch's was an odd gesture at an awkward time. The American Bicentennial had long ended, and détente had



During the transfer of *Lesnoi pozhar* to the Soviets, admiring the painting are (left to right): James Symington, Joseph Duffy, and Anatoly Dobrynin.

collapsed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978. Why would a hardnosed businessman like “Gussie” Busch donate what could legitimately be reckoned a family heirloom? He offered no exegesis, though a likely explanation may be that he hoped it would help land the beer concession for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. If so, that ambition lost its fizz when the United States subsequently boycotted the event. Once again, the painting had become a pawn to an unstable alloy of entrepreneurialism, war, and politics.¹⁷

At least it seemed that the out-of-Siberian exile of *Lesnoi pozhar* was ending. Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin joked, during the transfer ceremony, about keeping the painting in the embassy but worried about how a fire painting might be interpreted, then suggested it would go to an appropriate museum, perhaps Tetryatkov or Perm, he was not sure. A return to the Urals made sense; over the years at least some of Denisov-Uralsky’s art had wended its way back to the mountains and forests that had inspired it, installed as special collections within the art museums at Yekaterinberg and Perm. Upon learning of the putative repatriation of *Lesnoi pozhar*, the curator of eighteenth-to-twentieth century Russian art at the Perm State Art Gallery requested of the Soviet Ministry of Culture that the painting come to its galleries, where it might join the others, including the 1897 version. There was no reply. The painting had again vanished.¹⁸

FIRE AS ART

Where it hangs now, or whether it has again been pilfered or exploited, or if it even resides in Russia, is unknown. Its story, like its focal flame, has come to resemble a cultural vortex that collects and consumes the quotidian world even as it lofts those flame-transfigured woods into a kind of transcendence. Its central spiral of fire is a study of struggle that well replicates the extraordinary saga of the painting’s creation and subsequent odyssey. Its visual tension captures a dazzling instant in which the thrust of aspirational flame meets the ambient winds of greed, wiles, and political perversion. Whether Aleksei Kuz’mich was satisfied that he had caught the essence of fire is unknown, but his act has certainly made vivid a moment of history, and his painting has survived as an emblem of the enduring tension to make art out of a force of nature.

Whatever the original inspiration, *The Untamed Element* has imprinted itself on cross-cultural imaginations, and whatever the fate of the originating *Lesnoi pozhar*, its reproductions have propagated from spot to spot like the firebrands hurled by a torching fir. They seem deathless. In its history no less than its imagery, *The Untamed Element* offers a suite of distilled reversals from the expected. It shows a fire flung upward to rather than descended from the heavens. It describes an exile out of rather than into

Siberia. It offers an original that may, in the end, be less than its imitations. It displays an archetypal image almost Jungian in its instincts, a pillar of fire that testifies not to a Deity but to a deified Nature, a secular icon more widely known than any of Elijah in his fiery chariot, although unlike those of the prophet it could not promise to shield its creator from harm.

That image continues to percolate through the American public. Reproductions still decorate walls, fill second-hand stores, and inspire local artistes. And as for those *recherché* original oils on eBay—caveat emptor. □

Stephen J. Pyne is a professor at Arizona State University, and the author of many books on fire, most recently Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada *and the forthcoming* America's Fires: A Survey Past and Present *for the Forest History Society Issues Series.*

NOTES

1. Old Believers separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1666 to protest reforms dictated to them by Patriarch Nikon, supported by Tsar Alexis I, without consulting them or convening a council. The split led to persecution, and some fled.
2. Biographical information from Svetlana Semenova, *Ocharovan Uralom. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo A. K. Denisova-Ural'skogo [Enchanted by the Urals]* (Sverdlovsk, 1978). I am indebted to Irina Petrova James for translating and interpreting the relevant passages, which has made my synopsis possible, and to the Forest History Society which helped fund the costs of translation. Aleksei's birth year is disputed; some consider it 1863 or 1864. I follow Semenova.
3. Russia submitted over six hundred works of art, representing the collections of ten art societies, to the Fair. Denisov-Uralsky's silver medal was one of twelve awarded. See Mark Bennitt, ed., *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (New York: Arno Press, 1976; reprint of 1905 edition), 515; and especially Robert C. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money, 1900–1942* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 42–82; on the Wanderers and Denisov-Uralsky, see Williams, 43–44. A biographical sketch for the exposition listed membership in the following Russian art organizations: Exhibitors of the St. Petersburg Society of Artists, Spring Exhibitors of the Imperial Academy of Arts, Society of Amateurs of the Fine Arts in Ekaterinberg, and the St. Petersburg Art Society; from Letter of Halsey Ives to R. T. F. Harding, May 2, 1905, Halsey Ives Archives, St. Louis Art Museum.
4. Quotes are from Semenova and reflect her judgment based on letters sent from Finland, *Enchanted*, 103–112.
5. I rely on Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, for the details of this story; quote from 49. I am indebted to Robert for so generously sharing the results of his extraordinary sleuthing.
6. All details and quotes are again from Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, 49–52. On Grunwaldt's 1891 experience, in which the French organizer went bankrupt, see George F. Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 89–90. On Japan's acquisition of Russia's exhibit space, see "Extensive Exhibit," *Washington Post*, January 9, 1905.
7. Description from *Russia: Fine Arts, Catalogue of the Russian exhibition to the World's Fair, Saint Louis, USA, 1904, Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (St. Louis, 1904), 43, 59. Appraisal of painting from Letter from Halsey Ives to R. T. F. Harding, May 2, 1905, Ives Collection.
8. On plans for Portland, see "Extensive Exhibit."
9. On Grunwaldt's decline, see *New York Times*, May 22, 1906; and on his lawsuit, *New York Times*, August 9, 1907, and June 12, 1909.
10. The sales are described in the *New York Times*, March 7 and March 8, 1906, and the confiscation on March 10. The *Times* reported that it "appeared that the works already sold had been taken out of bond and the tariff on them paid." Quote on Kowalsky from Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, 61.
11. Converted to 2006 dollars, Havens' acquisition cost him \$814,064, a substantial sum, but only about \$1,500 per painting, a bargain for the cream of an exhibition.
12. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, 79–80.
13. On Busch's purchase, see letter from Halsey Ives to R. H. Harding, 15 February 1905, Ives Collection. I'm indebted to archivist Norma Sindelar for securing this vital document. On Busch's role in the exposition, see Bennitt, ed., *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*; a photo and caption summary are available on 85.
14. See letter of R. H. Harding to Halsey Ives, 11 February 1905, Ives Collection.
15. Quote from George Adams, "Today's Talk," *Gettysburg Times* (22 June 1938), p. 4.
16. See "Important Notice," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, November 9, 1909. U.S. Forest Service historic photo collection, accession 454356.
17. On Busch's motives, I rely on comments from Robert Williams. No official reason was given other than a vague gesture of friendship, and Anheuser Busch has offered no formal explanation. Repeated queries to the Busch Archives have gone unanswered, following an initial brush off.
18. Dobrynin's comments in Letter from James McCargar, National Endowment for the Humanities, to Robert C. Williams, July 30, 1979, page 3 (copy courtesy of Robert Williams). Information regarding the Russian scene in an email from Olga Klimenskaya, Curator of Russian Art for 18th–20th Centuries, Perm State Art Galleries, to Tatiana Volokitina, and forwarded to author on 8 June 2007.