

# S P H I N X F I N E A R T



**Aleksandr Evgen'evich Yakovlev (St. Petersburg 1887 - Paris 1938)**

## **Portrait of a Kirghiz**

inscribed, signed and dated 'Merghen/ Kirghiz/ Reyik Karane/ A lacovlev/ 4 Sept. 1931' (lower right)  
pastel and chalk on paper  
52 x 36.5 cm (20½ x 14¼ in)

Aleksandr Yakovlev's sanguine and pastel drawings, of which [A Desert Fort](#) is another example, are particularly refined works. In *Portrait of a Kirghiz* Yakovlev almost exclusively uses red chalk to depict the Kirghiz's face; to this he then lightly adds touches of black chalk to create the wispy tufts of beard. Remarkably, through the mere use of darker shading, Yakovlev manages to create lifelike and almost tangible features. The deep channels of the old man's forehead, his chapped lips, and the folds of skin under his eyes, bring this intriguing character to life.

In the summer of 1917, Yakovlev received a scholarship to study in the Far East, remaining there until 1919. During his sojourn abroad, the Russian Revolution broke out and on his return Yakovlev resettled in Paris. He became a member of the Russian émigré community and quickly established himself as a distinguished travelling artist. This reputation resulted in two considerable commissions by the motor company, Citroën. Appointed Artistic Adviser, Yakovlev joined Citroën on two caravan journeys led by Georges-Marie Haardt (1884-1932). During the first of these, from 1924 to 1925, Yakovlev took part in an expedition to the Sahara desert and Equatorial Africa, named the 'Croisière Noire'. His African

paintings were a big success and as a result Yakovlev was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government in 1926.

The second expedition, across Asia, the 'Croisière Jaune', was between 1931 and 1932. This expedition through treacherous conditions, saw Yakovlev travel to Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia and China, where he made numerous drawings and created a number of paintings portraying the indigenous people and the surrounding landscape. *Portrait of a Kirghiz* was one such work as was the comparable *Sharafat, Gulmit Juillet 1931*, (Private Collection) drawn a couple of months before. Both works are executed in Yakovlev's characteristic red chalk which picks out the deep furrows of the subjects' aged worn face. Neither figure meets the viewer's eye, but instead they look contemplatively out into space. Each drawing is a beautifully rendered, highly individualised portrait which reveals not only Yakovlev's masterly skill, but also his intense ethnographic interest. Critics praised the series and Yakovlev was hailed as 'the most accomplished and the most astonishing type, of those very rare ones for whom Fortune is waiting in the heart of the strangest regions with a store of unknown treasures.'

Yakovlev was born in St. Petersburg, the son of a naval officer, and studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts from 1905-1913. In 1912 he joined *Mir iskusstva*, the Russian magazine and art movement, which was so influential throughout Europe. He spent much of his life travelling, depicting the variety of cultures he encountered, and a mature work such as *Portrait of a Khirgiz* reflects the best of his art.

### Artist description:

Aleksandr Evgen'evich Yakovlev (Russian, 1887-1938) was a Russian painter, graphic artist and designer. His initial training in 1905–13 was at the Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg, where he studied principally under Dmitry Kardovsky. From 1909 Yakovlev contributed regularly to national and international exhibitions, and he was a member of both the World of Art group and the Union of Russian Artists. He was awarded an Academy scholarship for study in Italy and Spain in 1914–15, an experience that left an indelible mark on his stylistic evolution, as is clear from his recourse to Italian Renaissance devices and motifs in paintings such as his portrait of the Mexican artist *Roberto Montenegro* and *The Violinist* (both 1915; St Petersburg, Rus. Mus.)

Just before the October Revolution of 1917 Yakovlev and his close friend Vasily Shukhayev were regarded as the representatives of a new classicism in Russian art, and, in fact, the graphic clarity and materiality of their drawings and paintings bring to mind the contemporary poetry of Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Kuzmin, leaders of the Acmeist movement. Yakovlev, Shukhayev, Grigor'yev, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and other graduates of the Academy of Arts moved in the same circles as these literati, frequenting the cabarets in St Petersburg and contributing to Sergey Makovsky's review *Apollon*. Artistically and temperamentally, Yakovlev and Shukhayev were very close, and their red chalk and sanguine portraits and figure studies are often remarkably similar to each other. Their collaborative double portrait as *Harlequin and Pierrot* (1914; St Petersburg, Rus. Mus.) summarizes their mutual sympathy and respect.

In 1916 Yakovlev became a professor at the Institute of Art History in Petrograd (now St Petersburg), and, together with Grigor'yev and Sergey Sudeykin, he designed the interior of the Prival Komediantov (Comedians' Halt) cabaret in Petrograd. After travelling in Mongolia, China and Japan he settled in Paris in 1920. He achieved his reputation in the West as an ethnographical draughtsman: in 1925 he accompanied the Citroën Central Africa Expedition as an official artist and in 1931 did the same for the Citroën Trans-Asiatic Expedition, collaborations that resulted in superb depictions of native types, rituals and scenes. Yakovlev spent three years as Chairman of the Department of Painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, and returned to Paris in 1937.