

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



**Dominik Ernestovich Gagen (Russian 1810 - 1876)**

## **Scenes from Russian Life**

Circa: 1810-1876

signed in Cyrillic and dated 1838-43 (lower left and lower right variously)

pencil, black ink and wash on paper

largest 34 x 41.6 cm (13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in); smallest 23.9 x 28.4 cm (9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in) (8)

In Dominik Ernestovich Gagen's *Eight Scenes from Russian Life*, the viewer is presented with a variety of scenes from daily life, as experienced by the lower echelons of Russian society. Gagen's *Scenes from Russian Life* are exceptionally well-modelled and executed, with the artist paying particular attention to the intricate detailing of the figures' clothing and their accoutrements. Though the purpose of these particular sketches is unclear, they are similar to the illustrations in the album *Russian Scenes and Costumes*, published in Moscow in 1841, and have strong stylistic connections to the Russian *lubok*.

In each picture, Gagen creates a lively and jovial atmosphere, executed in a realistically open manner, from a pair of drunken men holding each other up on their walk back home, to a town scene populated by inebriated men, one of whom staggers with heavy limbs, or a group of colourful characters gambling.

Such subject matter was mirrored in the writings of the artist's literary contemporary, Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852), whose portrait Gagen had painted. Gogol's emphasis on a distinct Russian identity in many of his works, especially in *Dead Souls* (1842), saw him hailed as the father of modern Russian Realism. *Dead Souls* and other such works led people like the critic and lyrical poet Apollon Maikov

(1821-1897) to bemoan the absence of a 'national' school. This desire for a 'national' school and identity, coupled with the diminished importance of a hierarchy amongst genre painting, led to the emergence of the sort of art typified by Gagen's present set of works. Vissarion Grigoryevich Belinsky (1811-1848), the literary critic who asserted the importance of artists focusing on every day Russian life, wrote, 'in our day, art and literature have become an expression of social questions, more than ever before, because in our day... these questions have come to the fore of all other issues.'<sup>1</sup>

This approach to art spawned the *Peredvizhniki*, a group of social realists, amongst whose ranks were celebrated artists such as [Ilya Yefimovich Repin](#). The group upheld the views of Belinsky, and in many ways their work can be viewed as a progression from the type of art typified by this present set of drawings. Gagen, focusing on bawdy and drunken village life, was a social commentator, much like William Hogarth (1697-1764), though without the moralising overtones. Repin's concerns, however, and those of the other 'Wanderers', were of a more socio-political nature.

There are however obvious parallels to be drawn between Repin's and Gagen's work, chiefly in their chosen subject matter. Both portray the life of the common man of their time, with Gagen working in the early to mid-nineteenth century, and Repin, during the more politically sensitive period of the late nineteenth-century, when Russia, in an effort to compete with the newly unified Germany and the rapidly growing USA and Japan, saw considerable reaction against the increasing shift towards industrialisation.

Gagen worked as a province secretary before joining the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1837, the Academy awarded him the title of the teacher of drawing in secondary schools, and in 1859 the title of artist.

<sup>1</sup> Gray, R. P., *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford University Press, 2000), p.6.

### **Artist description:**

Dominik Gagen worked as a province secretary before joining the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1837 the Academy awarded him the title of the teacher of drawing in the secondary schools; and in 1859 the title of an artist for his watercolor image of *People scene into Malorossii*.