

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



**Ludwig Gedlek (Krakow 1847 - Vienna 1904)**

## **Mounted Cossacks & Mounted Cossacks Discovering a Landscape**

each signed and inscribed 'L. Gedlek/Wien' (lower right)

oil on panel, a pair (2)

20.5 x 31.5 cm (8 x 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in)

*'Always on horseback, always ready to fight, always on the alert.'*

- Alexander Pushkin wrote of the Cossacks

The Cossacks were free warrior-peasants of chiefly East Slavonic descent, living in communities in the southern steppe regions of Eastern Europe and Asia. The word 'Cossack' is of Turkish origin 'quzzaq', meaning 'adventurer' or 'freeman.' This word may well come from the Khazakh people of Central Asia, who themselves were at least partly descended from the truly terrifying Scythian horsemen feared by Herodotus. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, two Cossack hosts had emerged and by the sixteenth century militant Cossack states had been formed. The Turks started using the word to describe the people who had settled in the river valleys of what is now the Ukraine, yet the Cossacks never lost their love of freedom and fierce sense of independence.

Noted as cavalrymen, the Cossacks were subjected to the authority of the Russian government from the sixteenth century. As subjects of the Tsar, all Cossack males of 18 to 50 years of age became liable to military service for a period of up to 20 years. The Cossacks of the Russian frontier had to live in constant fighting trim, guarding national borders as well as internal ethnic borders. By the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire managed to fully annex all control over the Cossack hosts and rewarded them with privileges such as land for their service. At this time the Cossacks were actively participating in many Russian wars, such as the Caucasian War (1817-64), also known as the Russian Conquest of the Caucasus. Although Cossack tactics in open battles were generally seen as inferior to those of regular soldiers such as the Dragoons, Cossacks were excellent for scouting and reconnaissance duties, as well as undertaking ambushes.

This pair of paintings of mounted Cossacks by Ludwig Gedlek shows two contrasting scenes. In the first one, the group of travelling Cossacks appears to have stopped for a rest. Our eye is led into the painting by the muddy road upon which the Cossacks have been riding. Some of the group have dismounted to stretch their legs during what is probably a long and arduous journey. The central focal point of the work is a man who, having dismounted his horse, is lighting a long pipe. The man standing

to the left of the composition appears to be acting as a lookout, as is the mounted Cossack in the left foreground. These men both have rifles slung visibly over their shoulders and the standing man also carries a shashka. To the right of the composition is a thatched building, possibly the reason for this break in the journey, although there is no sign of life from within. This work depicts a moment of respite in the lives of warriors as they move on away from us, possibly towards battle.

The second painting stands in sharp contrast to the first, both in terms of the actions of the Cossacks and choice of palette. The scene is set in winter and the troop is now facing us and moves towards the viewer. The horses and men are exhausted, weak from battle and the sky has darkened, reflecting the melancholic tone. The softened colours and gentle tones in both works and the great attention to detailing in the costumes are typical of Gedlek's work.

Gedlek initially studied in Krakow, the city where he first exhibited. In 1873, on a scholarship, he moved to Vienna, where he continued his studies, and eventually settled permanently. His work usually has an equestrian theme, and the daily lives of Cossacks were a frequent source of inspiration.

### **Artist description:**

The central theme of Ludwig Gedlek's work is similar to the work of Joseph Brandt, who painted genre scenes from the life of the Cossacks, in particular the Ukrainian Zaporozhian Cossacks. In the nineteenth century numerous Polish painters took on Cossacks as their subject matter and they became a picturesque part of the iconography of European Romanticism. The history of Ivan Mazepa, the Cossack Hetman of the Hetmanate, for example, inspired Lord Byron's poem *Mazeppa* (1818), Tchaikovsky's opera of the same name (1881-1883) and Alexander Pushkin's poem *Poltava* (1828-1829). For Polish artists, however, the Cossacks, in particular Zaporozhian Cossacks, assumed a special, symbolic significance

Gedlek began his artistic studies at the Krakow School of Fine Arts under the direction of W. Łuszczkiewicz. In 1863 Gedlek had his exhibiting debut at the Art Society in Krakow (TPSP), where he later exhibited several times. In 1873 he received a scholarship which enabled him to travel to Vienna, where he continued his studies at the Academy until 1877. There he studied under the Austrian artist Eduard Peithner von Lichtenfels (1833-1913), who was known for his skilled and fluid technique, which he combined with a poetic view and humour, and also under C. Wuerzinger, who was a painter of religious and historical subjects. Gedlek continued teaching in Vienna, and finally settled there on a permanent basis. He took part in numerous exhibitions in Poland with the Art Society in Krakow, Lviv, Warsaw and abroad in Dresden and Vienna. A master of oil painting, Gedlek depicted landscapes, mostly of the outskirts of Krakow, genre scenes, hunting scenes and historical battle scenes, which frequently included his preferred subject matter of horses.