

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



Alexander Osipovich Orlovsky (Warsaw 1777 - St. Petersburg 1832)

Six Roundels Depicting Horsemen

five signed with monogram: four dated '1815'; one dated '1816'

pencil and gouache with gum arabic on paper

each 9.8 cm (3⁷/₈ in) diameter (6)

mounted as one, in folder bound in red morocco leather with a plaque engraved 'à Michel Lanskoy'

In these six roundels Alexander Osipovich Orlovsky depicts different horsemen. Two of the figures sit astride their steeds dressed in the thick armour of the heavy cavalry. They are accompanied by other soldiers and look out over extensive landscapes. One of them has drawn his sword, ready to commence battle. Two of the other roundels also depict cavalymen, although they are not as heavily protected. These figures appear to be cantering alongside their fellow soldiers, followed closely by other military figures. The remaining pictures depict figures whose livelihoods are also heavily dependent upon their horses. In one, a peasant family pauses to rest during a long journey. They have unharnessed their horse from the cart which is heavily laden with their possessions and the animal, temporarily freed from its burden, crops a thin patch of grass. The final image shows a man riding slowly home whilst leading another two horses. He has three animals, all of which are harnessed, suggesting that he is perhaps the driver of a troika, or a simple farmer.

Orlovsky painted at least five of the roundels between 1815 and 1816 and as a result they share certain stylistic traits. The horsemen, for instance, have been set against an extensive background and although they are relatively indistinct, each setting has been painted in a cool, muted palette. However, each roundel does contain a splash of bright colour, in the clothing of the figures, which enlivens the pictures.

Orlovsky depicted a variety of horsemen throughout his career, in different media. One such example, which bears strong similarities to the roundels, is his [*Horsemen*](#). In this work an exotically dressed soldier, armed with a sword and a bow, has just reached the top of a hill on horseback. He has momentarily paused so that his companions can join him and he points something out to them in the distance. This compositional device, where a single primary figure is followed by a couple of companions, is one which Orlovsky employs in several of the roundels; the mountainous landscapes in which the figures travel are also comparable. There is a focus on the costume and the weapons of the central figure which is also a feature of the military roundels, as is the cool palette.

Orlovsky was born in Warsaw and his artistic training, under some of the leading Polish artistic figures of the day, was sponsored by Princess Isabella Czartoryska (1736-1816). He travelled extensively and produced a great deal in the early stages of his career, and developed an confident and elegant style which balances realism with imagination.

In 1799, Orlovsky served under Prince Józef Poniatowski (1763-1813) as a caricaturist before his work drew the attention of Tsar Alexander I (1777-1825), and in 1802 he moved to St. Petersburg. In Russia, Orlovsky was invited by Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich (1779-1831) to execute drawings of uniforms and military parades, which were subsequently engraved and prompted many other commissions. In St. Petersburg he came to know members of the liberal aristocratic intelligentsia and frequented the celebrated circle of the historian Aleksey Nikolayevich Olenin (1763-1843). Orlovsky frequently sketched the streets of St Petersburg and many of his drawings were strong in social commentary. Most of his paintings from this time, however, were scenes of battle and army life, as well as Romantic subjects featuring brigands and shipwrecks. In 1809 Orlovsky was awarded the title of Academician of Battle Painting of the St. Petersburg Academy of Art and during the conflict of 1812 he depicted many of the leading figures in the Russian army.

Orlovsky was also one of the first Russian artists to take up lithography, a medium in which he was prolific. He also retained, until his death, his great reputation as an inventive but gentle caricaturist. His work was much admired by contemporaries, both for its skill and for the diverse national character of the subjects. This diversity is strongly in evidence in *Six Roundels Depicting Horsemen*.

Artist description:

Orlovsky was a Russian painter, draughtsman and printmaker of Polish birth. He trained at the Warsaw studio of Jan Piotr Norblin de la Gourdain and received support from Princess Isabella Czartoryska. He also studied under the Polish court painter Marcello Bacciarelli, the engraver Bartolomeo Follin and the Polish miniaturist Wincenty Fryderyk Lesseur (1745–1813). Until the turn of the century, Orlovsky's career was marked by alternating periods of concentrated work and of travel abroad, often as a soldier or entertainer. Few works from this period survive. Orlovsky's early paintings were timid and imitative; his drawings, however, are assured, elegant and amusing, suggesting the influence of Norblin's combination of realism and imagination. From Norblin he also learnt a free treatment of the subject and a concern with artistic expression.

In 1799 Orlovsky served Prince Józef Poniatowski (1763–1813) as a caricaturist, and he subsequently travelled in Lithuania. In 1801 he produced a series of engravings showing the release of Tadeusz Kosciuszko. These drew Orlovsky to the attention of Tsar Alexander I (1777–1825), and in 1802 he went to St Petersburg.

In Russia Orlovsky was invited by Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich (1779–1831) to execute drawings of uniforms and military parades (engravings of these were published in 1808). This work prompted many other commissions. In St Petersburg he came to know members of the liberal aristocratic intelligentsia, frequented the celebrated circle of the historian Aleksey Nikolayevich Olenin (1763–1843) and lived for a time at Uspenskoye, the estate of the patron of the arts Aleksey Romanovich Tomilov.

Orlovsky frequently sketched the streets of St Petersburg, many of his drawings being strong in social commentary. Most of his paintings from this time, however, were scenes of battle and army life, as well as Romantic subjects featuring brigands and shipwrecks.

In 1809 Orlovsky was awarded the title of Academician of Battle Painting of the St Petersburg Academy of Art for his picture *Cossack Bivouac*. He continued to produce striking drawings, most notably a series of interesting portraits, outstanding among which is a *Self-portrait* (c. 1809). Executed with bold distinctive strokes in sanguine and charcoal, the drawing's appeal lies in its integrity and expressiveness. It sets the artist in opposition to an external environment that he will not accept, making a bold assertion of individuality.

During the war of 1812 against Napoleon, Orlovsky produced some remarkable drawings of leading military figures such as *Denis Davydov*. In these bravura gives way to observation and a sense of warmth of character. Orlovsky continued to treat themes taken from everyday life. His drawings of beggars, prisoners and the rural and urban poor, such as *Peasant on a Wagon* (1812), *Train of Peasant Carts* (1810) or *Destitute Peasants by a Carriage* (1815), are rare subjects in the art of the early 19th century.

Orlovsky was also one of the first Russian artists to take up lithography. He executed 40 lithographs for Gaspar Drouville's book *Voyage en Perse, pendant les annees 1812 et 1813* (1819), and in 1826 he produced two large volumes of Russian scenes, *Ruskiye al'bomy* (Russian albums; St Petersburg), and also the volume *Kollektsiya Orlovskogo* (Orlovsky's collection; St Petersburg). He also retained, to the end of his life, his high reputation as an inventive but gentle caricaturist. The Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin greatly admired Orlovsky's drawings, both for their skill and for the national character of their subjects. In 1819 Orlovsky was appointed draughtsman in the Topographical Department of the General Staff, and in this capacity he travelled widely through Russia, sketching scenes and individuals found to be representative of the common people.

Collections

Orlovsky is represented in the following collections: State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg; Tret'yakov Gallery, Moscow; History Museum, Moscow, amongst others.