

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



Isaac Ilich Levitan (Kibarty, Lithuania 1860 - Moscow 1900)

River Landscape

inscribed in Cyrillic 'study by my brother, I Levitan, A Levitan' (lower right)

oil on board

14 x 21 cm (5½ x 8¼ in)

This charming work is a fine and typical example of the landscape studies that Isaac Ilich Levitan produced throughout his career. The landscape is divided into several distinct horizontal bands. In the foreground is the soggy riverbank, dotted with cows and horses, which is depicted in a soft green through which the brown of the sludgy mud seeps through. Beyond this is the broad violet band of the river, stretching across the composition before turning into the landscape on the left-hand side of the work. The far bank is depicted in a more intense shade of green, adding vitality to the work, before giving way to the muted colours of the sky, shrouded in wispy clouds.

A River Landscape bears an inscription from Levitan's brother, Adolf Ilich Levitan (1859-1933), authenticating the work. Adolf was also an artist, although he never achieved the success and renown of his brother. Following Isaac's death, Adolf organised an exhibition of his works in St. Petersburg, and it is common to see Isaac's paintings authenticated by Adolf in the same manner as *A River Landscape*.

A River Landscape is comparable to much of Levitan's output in his mature period, including a work such as [Lake](#). During the 1890s his work developed from landscapes notable for their minute depiction, to more confident but less detailed sketches. In both *A River Landscape* and *Lake*, form is simplified and the relationship of the colour scheme grows in importance. Although his palette in both these works is relatively understated, there is great nuance and subtle variation in both, and both compositions are rooted around the beauty of the violet horizontal band. *A River Landscape* demonstrates a lyrical and laconic side of Levitan that is in evidence in many of his mature landscape studies.

Levitan was born into a poor Jewish community in rural Lithuania, and the family moved to Moscow around 1870. By 1877 Levitan and his siblings had been orphaned and cast into abject poverty, but as he and Adolf had already been students at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, they managed to obtain scholarships. It was at art school, that Levitan was introduced, through his fellow student Nikolai Pavlovich Chekhov (1858-1889), to Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904), who would become a lifelong friend and influence. As Averil King has pointed out 'he and Chekhov were well-

matched intellectually and, significantly for Levitan's art, they shared a love of the Russian countryside, where they often walked together'.¹

In 1877 Levitan's works started to be publically exhibited and he soon developed a favourable reputation with both critics and collectors. In May 1879, after an assassination attempt on Alexander II (1818-1881), mass deportations of Jews forced Levitan to move to the suburb of Saltykovka, but officials relented after pressure from art lovers. During the 1880s Levitan began to exhibit with the Peredvizhniki, becoming a full member in 1891, and he worked closely with many of the leading Russian landscape painters of the period.

By the 1890s Levitan had achieved international renown, and was elected to the Imperial Academy of Arts, and named the head of the Landscape Studio. In the last year of his life, suffering from a terminal illness, he moved to the Crimea and stayed at Chekhov's house there. His last works were increasingly filled with light, reflecting the tranquillity and beauty of Russian nature. King says that 'Levitan's technique in portraying rural Russia involved the employment of simple compositions, a delicate and subtle tonality and, above all, a careful selection of motifs that would resonate with the viewer', qualities exemplified by *A River Landscape*.²

1 King, A., Isaak Levitan: Lyrical Landscape (Antique Collectors' Club, Suffolk, 2011) p.12.

² Ibid., p.13.

Artist description:

Russian landscape painter Isaac Ilyich Levitan was born in a shtetl of Kybartai, Kaunas region, Lithuania, into a poor but educated Jewish family. His father Elyashiv Levitan was the son of a rabbi, completed a Yeshiva and was self-educated. He taught German and French in Kaunas and later worked as a translator at a railway bridge construction for a French building company. At the beginning of 1870 the Levitan family moved to Moscow.

In September 1873, Isaac Levitan entered the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture where his older brother Avel had already studied for two years. Levitan's teachers were the famous Savrasov, V.G. Perov and V.D. Polenov.

In 1875, his mother died, and his father fell seriously ill and became unable to support four children; he died in 1879. The family slipped into abject poverty. As patronage for Levitan's talent and achievements and to keep him in the school, he was given a scholarship.

In 1877, Isaac Levitan's works were first publicly exhibited and earned favourable recognition from the press. After Alexander Soloviev's assassination attempt on Alexander II, in May 1879, and mass deportations of Jews forced the family to move to the suburb of Saltykovka, but officials responded to pressure from art devotees, and Levitan was allowed to return to the city of Moscow. In 1880 his painting *~~~~~ (Autumn day. Sokolniki)* was bought by famous philanthropist and art collector Pavel Mikhailovich Tretyakov.

In the spring of 1884 Levitan participated in the mobile art exhibition by the group known as the Peredvizhniki and in 1891 became a member of the Peredvizhniki partnership. During his study in the Moscow School of painting, sculpturing and architecture, Levitan befriended Konstantin Korovin, Mikhail Nesterov, architect Fyodor Shekhtel, and the painter Nikolai Chekhov, whose famous brother Anton Chekhov became the artist's closest friend. Levitan often visited Chekhov and some think Levitan was in love with his sister, Maria Pavlovna Chekhova.

In the early 1880s Levitan collaborated with the Chekhov brothers on the illustrated magazine *Moscow* and illustrated the M. Fabritsius edition "Kremlin". Together with Korovin in 1885-1886 he painted scenery for performances of the Private Russian opera of S.I.Mamontov.

Levitan's work was a profound response to the lyrical charm of the Russian landscape. Levitan did not paint urban landscapes; with the exception of the *View of Simonov Monastery* (whereabouts unknown),

mentioned by Nesterov, the city of Moscow appears only in the painting *Illumination of the Kremlin*. During the late 1870s he often worked in the vicinity of Moscow, and created the special variant of the "landscape of mood", in which the shape and condition of nature are spiritualized, and become carriers of conditions of the human soul (*Autumn day. Sokolniki*, 1879). During work in Ostankino, he painted fragments of the mansion's house and park, but he was most fond of poetic places in the forest or modest countryside. Characteristic of his work are pastoral landscapes largely devoid of human presence. Fine examples of these qualities can be seen in *The Vladimirka Road*, 1892 *Evening Bells*, 1892, and *Eternal Rest*, 1894, all in the Tretyakov Gallery. Though his late work displayed familiarity with Impressionism, his palette was generally muted, and his tendencies were more naturalistic and poetic than optical

In the summer of 1890 Levitan went to Yuryevets (Юрьевец) and among numerous landscapes and etudes he painted *The View of Krivooserski monastery*. So the plan of one of his best pictures, *The Silent Monastery*, was born. The image of a silent monastery and bridges over the river, connecting it with the outside world, expressed the artist's spiritual reflections. It is known that this picture made a strong impression on Chekhov.

In 1897, already world-famous, he was elected to the Imperial Academy of Arts and in 1898 he was named the head of the Landscape Studio at his alma mater. Levitan spent the last year of his life at Chekhov's home in Crimea. In spite of the effects of a terminal illness, his last works are increasingly filled with light. He was buried in Dorogomilovo Jewish cemetery. In April 1941 Levitan's remains were moved to the Novodevichy Cemetery, next to Chekhov's necropolis. Levitan did not have a family or children.

Isaac Levitan's hugely influential art heritage consists of more than a thousand paintings, among them watercolours, pastels, graphics, and illustrations.

A minor planet 3566 Levitan, discovered by Soviet astronomer Lyudmila Zhuravlyova in 1979 is named after him.

Collections

Levitan is represented in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, amongst other collections.