

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



**Russian School, c.1870**

## **A Settlement on the Banks of a River**

watercolour on paper  
34 x 49 cm (13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 19<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in)

This watercolour is dominated by the arresting depiction of a rocky promontory. A small settlement, comprised of two long log-barns and a few rustic dwellings, nestles on the riverbank under the overhanging crag. The size of the storage and its location suggests however that the settlement may be one of some commercial importance. The wide, murky river, although formally unidentified, one can suppose to be possibly the Volga or the Dnepr.

The cliff-face, massive and imposing, is the primary focus of this work, so much in fact that one fails to notice at first the discreet and highly detailed depiction of the riverside hamlet, and the various other architectural features. This painting thus presents itself not only as a study of nature, but also of nature's dominance over man's wretched efforts to harness it. The tiny neo-Classical folly, barely visible on the plateau, is a very poetic illustration, through its futility and smallness, of the overwhelming grandeur of nature, which appears so much more striking and beautiful than any human construction. Such purpose-built, purely decorative edifices were a novel and popular feature in eighteenth-century Europe, with numerous examples in England. Beyond this folly, the silhouette of the onion domes of a large church can be discerned, hinting at a larger settlement beyond the promontory.

The colouring and tonality of this painting are homogenous throughout the work: the artist has depicted a landscape where earth, sky and water merge with harmonious fluidity, and where sharp detailing is reserved for the architectural elements marking a human presence. In this sense this watercolour appears to be in keeping with the works of Russian contemporaries such as Alexei Savrasov (1830-1897), who, amongst other works, executed a number of paintings depicting the [landscapes around the Volga River](#).

Savrasov explored the effects of the combination of land and water, both from an artistic and emotional point of view. His landscapes became expressions of emotion, and his lyrical approach to nature made him the founder of what became known as the 'mood landscape'. Another contemporary artist whose landscape work takes on the same poetry, within a highly naturalistic depiction, as in this watercolour, is [Fyodor Alexandrovich Vasilyev \(1850-1873\)](#). A popular landscape painter in the 1870s, Vasilyev's

artistic circle included such luminaries as Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi (1837-1887), [Ivan Ivanovich Shishkin \(1832-1898\)](#), and [Ilya Yefimovich Repin](#), with whom he travelled on the Volga in 1870.

Vasilyev's resultant *View of the Volga: Barges* (1870) was a great success; he also executed other works such as *Volga Lagoons* (1870), and *Bank of the Volga after a Thunderstorm* (1871). From this voyage Repin drew his renowned *Barge Haulers on the Volga*. Though Vasilyev only lived to the age of twenty-three, his contribution to Russian landscape painting was considerable. His influence, or at least an artistic kinship, is present in this very evocative contemporary work.