SPHINX FINE ART



Alexei Alekseevich Harlamoff (Saratov 1840 - Paris 1922)

Portrait of a Young Woman
signed 'Harlamoff' (lower left)
charcoal on paper
51 x 37 cm (20 x 14½ in)

In this exquisite charcoal drawing a young girl casts her eyes down, shyly avoiding the viewer's gaze. She clutches her right hand to her heart, holding her shawl tight to her chest. Her hair is tied loosely at the top of her head, and a few strands fall framing her face. Alexei Alekseevich Harlamoff smudges the extremes of the subject, such as her hair and shawl, so that we are instantly drawn to the girl's face and full lips. The lines of the charcoal and the way they flow to create the most intricate features indicate the agility and expertise of Harlamoff's draughtsmanship.

Portrait of a Young Woman is a fine example of Harlamoff's characteristic, informal executions of idealised girls and young women. Harlamoff worked prolifically throughout his lifetime and the present drawing is comparable to many of his works. The slightly coy and withdrawn character of the sitter in the present drawing is found in many of his works, for example *Head of a Young Girl* (State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). In both cases the sitters seem bashful, holding their hands to their chests slightly defensively: Harlamoff has thus presented images of modest beauty. Harlamoff's technical skill is evident in his modelling of light and his soft, careful and delicate handling in the depiction of the sitters'

faces.

Harlamoff produced numerous portraits of this type but although they invariably share the quality of idealised beauty, there is great variety in the personalities of his young sitters. He often used flowers to symbolise their innocence and the fragility of youth, and always retained a wholly Russian feel to them, through their facial features or dress. Harlamoff was not concerned with producing accurate portraits, rather he was fascinated with the aesthetic impact. His brilliance was is in bringing out the sitter's natural beauty and getting them to immediately engage with the viewer through a range of emotions.

Harlamoff was born in Russia and, having excelled at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, he moved to Paris in 1869, where he spent most of his life. Here he was taught by Léon Bonnat (1833-1922), one of the leading French artists of the day, famed for his portraits, who was to have a profound influence on Harlamoff's work. He started to exhibit regularly throughout the 1870s, and gained great critical acclaim; his portraits were praised by Emile Zola (1840-1902) as some of the best work of the 1875 Salon.

In 1880 Harlamoff was accepted as a full member of the Association of Itinerant Art Exhibitions, the most progressive and influential artistic group in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet despite this membership his 'art was more appreciated in Europe than in Russia,' as Harlamoff was criticised in his homeland for his subject matter, which was said to show an indifference to the problems of Russian society.[1] In contrast his work was well received in Western Europe because it demonstrated such talent and skill and such a focus on beauty charmed many viewers, including Queen Victoria (1819-1901) who admired his work at the Glasgow International Exhibition in 1888.

[1] Sugrobova-Roth, O. & Lingenauber, E., *Alexei Harlamoff: Catalogue Raisonné* (Düsseldorf, 2007), p. 7.

Provenance:

Doyle New York, European and American Paintings and Sculpture, 4 May 1995, lot 13
Private collection, USA

Literature:

O. Sugrobova-Roth and E. Lingenauber (Eds.), *Alexei Harlamoff: catalogue raisonné.*, Düsseldorf: Editions A.Harlamoff, 2007, p.286, No.326, illustrated pl.276

Artist description:

Harlamoff was born close to Saratov on the Volga River, and enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg at the age of 14. He won a gold medal in 1868 for his painting entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. This enabled him to study in Paris at the École des Beaux Arts under the great portrait painter and teacher Leon Bonnat. Harlamoff's talent in this area soon became clear as Emile Zola rated his portrait of Ivan Turgenev as amongst the best works of the Paris Salon of 1876. He regularly exhibited at the Paris Salon and won a second-class medal at the 1878 Paris Universal Exhibition.

Harlamoff learned his skills copying old master paintings such as Rembrandt's Anatomy Lessons. He painted many military scene's and covered religious subjects in his early years. When his career evolved he became a respected portrait painter with important sitters as Tsar Alexander II, Prince Demidoff-San Domato and Ivan Tourguéneff. Harlamoff is however best know for his informal portraits of sitters who he painted for their beauty and innocence. Harlamoff often used flowers to symbolise the short-lived innocence of youth. He preserved the Russian ambience in the details of for example a dress or facial features.

Queen Victoria greatly admired his painting of children playing with flowers that was exhibited at the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1888. Harlamoff came to the attention of wealthy American and European collectors who appreciated his idealised portraits of young women and girls.

The question about the time and the place for death of Alexei Harlamoff remains open. In literature it is most frequently indicated he died in Paris in 1922. Claims he died in Saratov are not likely to be true. Books with the records about death in 1922 from the Civil Registry Office Saratov were preserved completely, but his name is not mentioned. In 2005 a painting signed by Harlamoff and dated 1923 was discovered in a private collection.

Collections

Harlamoff is represented in the following collections: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; The Athenaeum; Chi-Mei Museum, Taiwan; Alexander III Museum, St Petersburg; Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, amongst others.