

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



Pyotr Petrovich Sokolov (St. Petersburg 1821 - St. Petersburg 1899)

A Provincial Churchyard

signed with initials and dated '1841' (lower right)
pencil and wash on paper
24 x 34 cm (9½ x 13½ in)

Revealing a brilliant command of graphic technique, *A Provincial Churchyard* exudes a delicate tranquillity. Two people pass one another in the square as they go about their morning walk. A playful dog is the only aspect of the scene which breaks the quietude of the occasion, while his master makes a futile attempt to call him to heel. The church itself is small and intimate, bearing many of the features synonymous with Russian provincial architecture, including an octagonal dome and frontal bell tower. Despite the modesty of the church itself, one can assume from the size of the cemetery that this was an area of prominence. Tall, leafy trees line the graveyard, which is full of opulent tombs, embellished with magnificent crosses.

Although the location of the church is unidentifiable, it is a typical example of the type of church that proliferated throughout the Russian countryside during the second half of the eighteenth century, as Catherine the Great's (1729-1796) predilection for the neo-Classical style in architecture influenced building tastes across the country. Although 'country estates and peasant settlements were free from building restrictions ...changes in rural building were generally in a direction that met with the empress' approval and accorded with her architectural tastes'.¹ A comparable church to the present one is the Assumption Church in the village of Boldino, which shares the same intimate grandeur. The church in Boldino was built in 1795 for the village by the local noble, Lev Aleksandrovich Pushkin, grandfather of the great writer, in the fashionable style of the time, and it seems probable that the building seen here was built in similar circumstances and at a similar time, as they both blend the prevailing European neo-Classical style with traditional Russian architectural motifs.

The present work is dated 1841, at which time Pyotr Petrovich Sokolov was studying at the Imperial Academy of Arts. The work contains indications that it may be by a young artist. The very deliberate recession, for example, is suggestive of an artist learning his craft. Sokolov's natural talent is unmistakeable, however, in areas such as his handling of watercolour and his judgement of tone. Very little of Sokolov's early work of this period survives, and so *A Provincial Churchyard* is a valuable

document on the initial stages of his career.

Sokolov was the son of Pyotr Fedorovich Sokolov (1791-1848), the noted portraitist who was patronised by many of Russia's aristocratic families. In addition to his father he also came under the direct influence of his uncle [Karl Pavlovich Bryullov](#), who was a teacher at the Imperial Academy at the same time that Sokolov studied there. His career took a very different course to his father's as he chose to diverge from the formal portraits for which his father was so well known. His work encompasses a range of rural subject matter, particularly hunting scenes with dogs, and peasant scenes.

Artist description:

Pyotr was from a family of Russian artists. His father Pyotr Fyodorovich Sokolov (Moscow 1791 - 1848 Stary Merchik, now in Kharkiv region, Ukraine), studied at the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg from 1800 to 1810 and continued to live there until 1846, when he moved to Moscow. He was the first Russian master to paint portraits only in pure watercolours, a technique that supplanted the miniature portrait during the period 1820–50. Sokolov's subtle lyricism, the delicacy of his use of colour, the lightness and vivacity of his style of painting and the sincerity of his interpretation of character all contributed to the widespread popularity of his portraits. Among Sokolov's best works are portraits of Nikita Murav'yov (1824), a leading member of the Decembrist conspiracy of 1825, General Nikolay Rayevsky (1826), hero of the War of 1812 against the French, and Aleksandr Pushkin (1836; all Pushkin, A. S. Pushkin Museum).

Sokolov travelled widely in Russia and painted a number of sharply observed genre scenes depicting the everyday life of peasants and landowners. He was also a leading book illustrator, and his illustrations for the novel *Dead Souls* by Nikolay Gogol are especially renowned. These were executed in watercolour in the late 1880s and the 1890s and were produced in two cycles, the first in colour and the second in black and white. His interpretation of the text was intensely dramatic, verging on the grotesque, but it was also extraordinarily detailed in its observation of everyday life.