

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



**Russian School, c.1840**

## **View of Simbirsk**

inscribed on the mount  
watercolour on paper  
20 x 36 cm (8 x 14¼ in)

A serene and idyllic atmosphere pervades this pastoral scene. A cowherd takes rest on a grassy bank, under the lofty boughs of tree. Below him, his herd of goats, sheep and cattle languish in the shade, grazing on the abundant greenery.

This enchanting drawing evokes a strong sense of timelessness. The slow, serene pace of the river craft, which leisurely drift along the gently flowing Volga, mirrors the drowsy state of the cowherd. In a scene characterised by its tranquillity, simple beauty and innocent charm, the artist appears to hark back to seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting. The fluid and spontaneous technique with which the artist applies the wash to the river, and the monochromatic scheme used to create uniform tone, are in keeping with the drawings and watercolours of the great Dutch masters such as [Jan van Goyen \(1596-1656\)](#); whilst the meticulous attention paid to the diversity of foliage is in line with Russian contemporaries such as Mikhail Lebedev (1811-1837).

In the centre of the work, the gnarled trunk and full branches of a tree dominate, breaking up the landscape into two halves and drawing the viewer's eye to the foreground. Wash is applied across the work to create tone and form, whilst pencil is meticulously used to emphasise the outline of each element, from the crest of the hillock on the opposite bank, to the spires and windows of the building of Simbirsk.

Situated on the banks of the Volga River, southeast of Moscow, Simbirsk, now known as Ulyanovsk, was founded in 1648 as a fortress town. The fort of Simbirsk, which was situated on a bluff on the western shore of the river, was built to protect the Russian Empire's eastern frontier, though the town suffered a long siege by the rebel leader Stenka Razin (1630-1671) in 1670. Designated a city in 1796, Simbirsk was severely damaged by fire in 1864.

By 1856 the population of Simbirsk was 26,000, composed primarily of Russians, and smaller numbers of Mordvinians, Chuvash and Volga Tatars. The Russian Orthodox Church dominated, as demonstrated by the numerous spires that reach upward in *View of Simbirsk*. The economy was driven by rural

pursuits, with most of the area devoted to farming grain, lentils and potatoes, whilst pasture, as depicted here, formed a smaller percentage of the economic structure.

The following account, dating to around the time of the present work, provides a useful, picturesque description of the town, and goes some way to explaining its artistic allure: 'Simbirsk is a large and improving town; the buildings are almost all modern, although it boasts one of the oldest monasteries in Russia...The situation of the town is good, being placed on an eminence above the river...The weather is remarkably fine, and the view much more picturesque than anything we had yet met with. The eye follows the winding of the river for many miles, and there was more bustle and movement than we were accustomed to. We loitered here a couple of hours, tempted by a brighter sun than was usual in this rainy summer.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cottrell, C.H., *Recollections of Siberia; in the years 1840 and 1841*, (J.W. Parker, 1842), p. 22.