

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



Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (Metz 1734 - Saint-Denis-du-Port 1781)

Le Cabaret de Moskou

pen and black ink with gray wash on paper
19 x 23.5 cm (7½ x 9¼ in)

In this important work by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, we see a variety of figures outside a tavern on the outskirts of Moscow. On the left-hand side three intoxicated figures sit or lie in the mud by some discarded barrels. On the other side of the work, figures crowd around a stall trying to buy refreshments, whilst others relax in the sunshine. These figures are in the shadow of a tall wooden building, which has a balcony on which more inebriated figures stand, although one of them looks as if he is about to fall over the edge. From this structure the diagonal of the city's arcaded stone wall leads the eye back in and across the work, to the distant towers of a Moscow. Despite being set on the outskirts of a town there is a strong rustic feel to the work, with the tavern overgrown by plants, and mud and trees everywhere.

The present drawing is a highly finished study for one of Le Prince's etchings, which were extremely popular and successful in France. A comparison of *Le Cabaret de Moskou* with [the finished etching](#), (Private Collection) indicates that it must have been one of the final preparatory drawings. The broad washes of the drawing were conveyed in the final print through the use of aquatint, a technique of printmaking in which Le Prince was a pioneer, and which was later popularised by artists such as Francisco Goya (1746-1828). The Cleveland Museum of Art also contains a highly comparable preparatory drawing for the print, although slight compositional differences and a relative lack of finish suggests that the museum's version must be an earlier one.¹ According to two separate sources the print of *Le Cabaret de Moskou*, also had a pendant entitled *View of the Outskirts of Nerva*.² *Le Cabaret de Moskou* draws on themes that recur frequently in Le Prince's work. In 1769 Le Prince showed one of his most important oil paintings, [The Cabak, a Tavern outside Moscow](#), at the Salon in Paris. Although the present drawing is less crowded and more focused on the setting, they share a similar central wooden structure: Foster considers *Le Cabaret de Moskou* 'to be a kind of reprise of the painting'.³

Le Prince was a pupil of François Boucher (1703-1770), and became famous for his depictions of Russian life. He worked in Russia from 1758 to 1763, but drew from his time there long after his return to France. His works appealed to the French public because of their exotic nature. His russeries were part of the Rococo trend that saw foreign subjects and motifs, especially Chinese and Turkish, achieve great popularity. He also achieved enduring fame because of his significant contribution to printmaking; the present work is fascinating and important because it represents such a finished step in the printmaking process, the tonal variety recalling the aquatint technique which Le Prince pioneered.

¹ The Cleveland Museum of Art's version is illustrated in *French Master Drawings from the Collection of Muriel Butkin*, ed. Foster, C.E., exhib. cat. (Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, 2001), p. 39.

² Hédou, J., *Jean Le Prince et son Oeuvre* (174, no. 176); Sjöberg, Y., *Inventaire du Fonds Français: Graveurs du XVIIIe Siècle* (480, no. 173).

³ Foster, p. 38.

Provenance:

Neil Phillips, Montreal then Montpellier Station, VA;
thence by descent to the estate of Sharon Phillips;
with David Tunick, Inc., New York, exhibited at TEFAF, Maastricht, 2008.

Artist description:

Born to a family of ornamental sculptors and gilders, he became famous for creating a new kind of genre picture, based on the direct observation of Russian subjects, and also for perfecting aquatint technique. Sometime around 1750 he became a pupil of François Boucher, thanks to the protection of the Maréchal de Belle-Isle (1684–1761), governor of Metz. Boucher's saturated brushwork, highly finished surfaces and incisive drawing had a decisive impact upon the young artist, as did, perhaps, the diversity of his output. He was also inspired by 17th-century Dutch and Flemish genre and landscape painters.

Le Prince is said to have made a trip to Italy in 1754, fleeing from the much older wife whom he had married in 1752, but there is as much evidence against such a trip as for it. By July 1757 Le Prince had arrived in St Petersburg. Well received by the French envoy, the Marquis de l'Hôpital, he received more than 40 commissions to execute overdoors for the Empress Elizabeth in the newly constructed Winter Palace; he received more commissions from Peter III (1728–62). Le Prince is said to have travelled extensively in Russia, according to some as far as Siberia. His prints show a knowledge of the north-western and western Empire, but the number of imperial commissions that cover his entire sojourn from 1757 to 1762 makes it unlikely that he travelled as much as has been claimed. The drawings he made in Russia (e.g. Paris, Louvre) provided the basis for a considerable body of work that added to the general taste of the 18th century for exotica.

The years between 1763 and 1775 mark the summit of Le Prince's career and production. From 1764 to 1768 he was at work on drawings; Philadelphia, PA, Rosenbach Library, for the *Voyage en Sibérie*; Paris, 1768, of the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Chappe d'Auteroche (1728–69). In 1765 he was received (reçu) as a member of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture with a painting representing a *Russian Baptism*; Paris, Louvre, and showed 15 pictures at the Paris Salon, all of Russian subjects. In 1769 Denis Diderot severely criticized one of his Salon exhibits, *Le Cabak*; Stockholm, National Museum, for its lack of finish; Diderot, however, also praised Le Prince for his refined mastery of aquatint technique. Between 1765 and 1768 Le Prince published several suites of etchings and aquatints on Russian themes, and he exhibited 29 sheets at the Salon of 1769. The popularity of his Russian subjects is also shown by his tapestry cartoons of *Russian Games*.

After 1770 ill-health caused Le Prince to retire to the Brie district near Paris. He then concentrated more on landscapes and pastoral subjects, such as *Landscape near Tobolsk*; Rouen, and the *Russian Festival*; 1770, Angers. Working from sketches executed from life and using models and actual costumes brought back from his travels, Le Prince introduced an almost ethnographic concern and exacting accuracy into his rendition of exotic subjects. Although these Russian pictures constitute the best-known aspect of his output, he also produced Classical subjects, such as *Anacreon*; Lawrence, U. KS, Spencer Museum of Art, and gallant genre pictures, such as *Fear*; Toledo, Ohio Museum of Art, as well as French landscapes.

Collections

Le Prince is represented in the following collections: Hermitage, St Petersburg; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery, London; Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, New Zealand; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College, Florida; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Musées de Lorraine, France; Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, amongst others.