

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



Alexei Alekseevich Harlamoff (Saratov 1840 - Paris 1922)

A Young Girl in Traditional Costume

signed and dated 'Harlamoff/1881' (lower right)

black ink on paper

46 x 30 cm (18 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in)

In this finely depicted ink drawing, a gypsy child stares out at the viewer, entrancing us with her large, round eyes. She meets the viewer's gaze with a neutral but alert expression, as she waits quietly and obediently for her portrait to be drawn; only her fidgeting fingers suggest the natural restlessness of a child. She is dressed in the simple garb of a gypsy: a long shawl, patterned with horizontal stripes over her shoulders, a simple headdress, large hooped earrings, a beaded necklace and shoes that appear to be crudely cobbled together. Alexei Alekseevich Harlamoff depicts the young girl with short sharp pen-strokes, which he has built up to give the portrait a real sense of depth. His careful control endows the sitter with a delicate quality appropriate to her youth.

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Born in Russia and educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Harlamoff 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, who was to have a profound influence on Harlamoff's work. He started to exhibit regularly throughout the 1870s, which gained him critical acclaim; his portraits were praised by Émile Zola (1840-1902) as some of the best work of the 1875 Salon.

Harlamoff soon became a highly respected portraitist, with sitters including Tsar Alexander II (1818-1881) and Prince Anatole Demidoff (1830-1870). However, his most successful works were his masterful portraits of young girls, often dressed as peasants, who were painted purely for their beauty. There was a tradition in Russian art for painting this type of anonymous female portrait, dating back to the work of [Pietro Antonio Rotari \(1707-1762\)](#), and the critical and commercial success of Bonnat's works had led to a revival.

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 and 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.

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.

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The question about the time and the place of 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.