

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



Russian School, c.1820

Encore un Pourceaugnac

titled and inscribed on mount 'Encore un Pourceaugnac/'

Je suis un de ces pauvres provinciaux sur le compte du quel on cherche toujours à se divertir'

watercolour and bodycolour on paper, laid down on board

20 x 26.3 cm (7⁷/₈ x 10³/₈ in)

The present watercolour illustrates the final scene in a play by Eugene Scribe (1791-1861), *Encore un Pourceaugnac*, of 1817, subsequently published under the title, *Le Nouveau Pourceaugnac*. A comedy inspired by Molière's (1622-1673) *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* of 1669, the play first opened at the Vaudeville theatre in Paris in February 1817. Scribe knew that his Parisian audience would be familiar with the works of Molière, and so proffered a new version of Molière's script, which itself becomes the core plot of Scribe's play.

The play was made into an opera by Catterino Cavos (1777-1840) and performed in St. Petersburg in 1819. The present drawing may have been made on that occasion, an idea reinforced by the Russian military costumes worn by the masculine figures in the scene.

In Molière's original *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, the titular character is betrothed to M. Oronte's daughter Julia, who is in love with Eraste. In Scribe's version, Theodore is in love with his cousin Nina, the daughter of his commanding officer, who has betrothed Nina to Ernest de Rouffignac, the son of an old friend in Limoges, whom they have never met. The character Jules suggests that the couple use the methods found in Molière's comedy, *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, a performance of which they saw the previous evening, to resolve the issue. However, Tiennette, Nina's goddaughter, in a case of mistaken identity divulges the plot to Ernest de Rouffignac, believing him to be a fellow conspirator.

Knowing that he is to be plotted against, Ernest turns the Molière scenarios to his advantage, playing along with the couple's game, though responding with unexpected remarks. In the final scene, Scene XX, which is depicted here, the defeated conspirators discover they must pay for a dinner, which Ernest has ordered, and Ernest reveals his real identity to Nina's father.

Unlike the Molière play however, where M. de Pourceaugnac is disgraced and banished, Ernest comes out triumphant, and the play finishes in a happy ending for all concerned. Having failed to fall in love with Nina, Ernest relinquishes his right to marry her, and instead celebrates with the newly betrothed couple, Nina and Theodore. As in Molière's play, the concluding celebration is complete with music.

All the characters in the present work represent the quintessence of latest Regency fashion. As with the interior setting, with its stuccoed garlands and urns, the clothes are inspired by all things neo-Classical.

The women wear high-waisted Empire-style dresses with long flowing lines, and the men sport long breeches, cutaway coats and the latest style of facial hair, 'Mutton Chops'.

The exact purpose for which *Encore un Pourceaugnac* was executed is unclear - perhaps it was a set and costume design. However, the link between Russian culture and French language and literature goes back to the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725) and Catherine II (1729-1762), under whose auspices French was adopted amongst Russia's nobility as the language of conversation and correspondence. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, and around the time of the execution of the present work, French was still the nobility's language of choice, and the works of French authors were well-known to them. The Mikhailovsky Theatre, established by a decree of Tsar Nicholas I (1796-1855) opened in 1833, and marked the start of an eighty-five year long tradition of French theatre in St. Petersburg. The year of its inauguration, a French troupe of actors who had previously shared the stage with Russian actors at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, moved into the new building. Run by the Imperial Theatres Company, under the control of the Ministry of the Imperial Court, actors for the theatre were sourced directly from Paris, and works by writers such as Molière, Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870) were performed. The theatre became the centre for French culture amongst the Russian intelligentsia and aristocracy, and a place where people perfected their French and indulged in gossip surrounding Parisian society. The French troupe left the theatre following the October Revolution.