SPHINX FINE ART

Nicholai Egorovich Sverchkov (St. Petersburg 1817 - 1898)

Winter Sleigh Ride

signed in Cyrillic, inscribed and dated '1859' (lower left)
pencil and watercolour on paper
22 x 32.5 cm (8¾x 12¾ in)

Winter Sleigh Ride demonstrates Nikolai Egorovich Sverchkov's ability to charmingly capture Russian folk-genre. This free and expressive pencil and watercolour drawing depicts a lone peasant borne swiftly across the bitter winter landscape by his horse. Slumped on his sleigh and wrapped in traditional Russian furs, he is perhaps returning home from working the land. He appears cold as the icy air bites through him, and his solitude is enhanced by the white blanket of snow covering the inhospitable surroundings. By comparison his horse, despite the load and its slight build, charges effortlessly through the plain with gusto, nostrils flared.

Horses have appeared in works of art throughout history, dating back to pre-historic times, and the depiction of rural activity and equine study was a common theme in Sverchkov's *oeuvre.* In *Winter Sleigh Ride* we see a perfect example of the 'flying gallop.' The horse's legs stretch out both in front and behind him. This was a common depiction of the horse in motion in the nineteenth century, but in truth an inaccurate one. Sverchkov may have been influenced by the horse painter George Stubbs (1724-1806). Stubbs is widely regarded as the greatest of all horse painters, his ability to depict the grace and beauty of equine subjects without romanticising them won him wide acclaim. Stubbs depicts - in his 1791 portrait of *Baronet with Samuel Chifney* - the motif of the 'flying gallop' which is used here.

Despite its lack of realism, the 'flying gallop' still provides a convincing representation of speed and power and, like Stubbs, Sverchkov continues this technique throughout his work. In the oil painting *Troika in Winter* (Private Collection), Sverchkov displays the same rural themes that are present in *Winter Sleigh Ride.* In a troika, three large men heavily laden with thick furs, traverse a bitter winter landscape. The two huddled figures to the left of the scene drag behind them a sheaf of firewood to later warm themselves. This further emphasises Sverchkov's ability to capture Russian rural activity of the era.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1817, the artist spent his early career serving in the economics department of

the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. He sent his first set of paintings to the academic exhibition in 1839 and two years later, he left his governmental post to concentrate on painting. Sverchkov was a prominent equine painter and studied horses in depth at the Khrenosky and Chesmensky state farms. Such was his talent for portraying rural activity that in 1852, he was entered into the Academy in St. Petersburg and was awarded the title of Academician of 'folk genre.' His *Return from the Bear Hunt,* exhibited in 1863, was bought by Napoleon III (1808-1873). For this, and two other paintings, *The Fair* and *Station,* he was awarded the French Order of the Legion of Honour. Sverchkov died in Tsarskoe Selo in 1898.

Artist description:

Nikolai Yegorovich Sverchkov was a Russian painter and engraver. Sverchkov's *Return from the Bear Hunt*, exhibited in 1863, was bought by Napoleon III. For this and two other paintings (*The Fair* and *The Station*) Sverchkov was awarded the Order of the Legion of Honor. Returning to Petersburg from abroad in 1864, Sverchkov painted *The Turn-Out of Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich on the Military Parade of 1664* for Alexander II.

Originally Sverchkov served in the economic department of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1839 he sent his first paintings to academic exhibition and two years later left his governmental office. An animal painter, Sverchkov started his creative work at the Khrenovskiy and Chesmenskiy state stud farms. In 1852 he was awarded the title of academician of "the folk genre". The 1850s were marked by his friendship with Nikolai Nekrasov, in whose Yaroslavl manor of Karabikha Sverchkov spent much of his time.