

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



Konstantin Karlsonn (1854-1939)

A View of Tallinn from Nõmme

signed 'Konsti Karlsonn' and inscribed 'Nõmme' (lower left)

oil on canvas laid on board

21 x 33.5 cm (8½ x 13 in)

This view by Konstantin Karlsonn presents the city of Tallinn, as seen from the surrounding hills. Karlsonn's interesting viewpoint is gained from a position in a clearing, some distance from the bustling Baltic coast city. There is a path flanked by conifers that draws the eye into the painting, in the direction of the distant city. The protruding architectural spires are echoed by the natural peaks and spikes of the conical trees. This clever artistic play on composition is taken to another level with the distinctly triangular form of the white clouds hovering over the city, which is directly mirrored by the similarly angled contours of the valley below. This is a theme possibly developed from Caspar David Friedrich's (1774-1840) famous series of romantic and religious church and tree pictures, executed from 1807 onward. These symbols of religion with the a landscape context raise themes of spirituality and man's place in the glory of nature.

On the left of the panorama one can see the spire of the medieval Cathedral of St. Mary the Virgin, now the main Lutheran church in Estonia. Along from St. Mary's is the Tall Hermann tower, built in the south-western corner of Toompea Fortress at the end of the fourteenth century, its name coming from the tales of the medieval hero Hermann. Next is the instantly recognisable silhouette of the 124m spire of Oleviste Kirik (St. Olav's Church), which was the tallest building in the world between 1549 and 1625. Furthest to the right is the Old City Hall: in 1530 its spire was topped with a decorative weather-vane depicting a warrior called Old Thomas, who became the city's symbol.

The German, Danish and Swedish name Reval, by which Tallinn was originally known, originated from the thirteenth century Estonian word for the county of Rävåla. It is commonly believed that the name Tallinn is derived from 'Taani-linn(a)' meaning a castle or town in Danish. As an important port for trade between Russia and Scandinavia, Tallinn was a strategic target for the Kingdom of Denmark, and in 1219 Valdemar II of Denmark (1170-1241) landed in the Estonian town of Lindanisse defeating the Estonians and taking the city. The Danes sold Tallinn to the Teutonic Knights in 1346. From the mid-fourteenth century the city flourished, due to its advantageous position in the centre of trade between western and northern Europe, and Russia.

In 1561 Tallinn became a dominion of Sweden and remained so until 1710 when, during the Great Northern War, the Swedish troops based in the city were forced to surrender to Imperial Russia. However, Tallinn retained its local self-government, and its cultural and economical autonomy within Imperial Russia under the Duchy of Estonia. Nationalist efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to the proclamation of the Independence Manifesto on 24th February, 1918. Since then, however, the history of Tallinn has been dominated by a long struggle between Russia and Germany for political control of the city and its environs, and it was not until 1991 that Tallinn became the capital of a *de facto* independent country.

Karlsonn's *A View of Tallinn from Nõmme* is impressionistic in treatment, with its loose brushwork and emphasis on light and tone, and probably dates to the late nineteenth century. Karlsonn's attention to the subject, and particularly its architecture, underlines the importance of Tallinn as a national symbol in its struggle for independence. Moreover, Karlsonn paints the city from some distance away, placing it within the peaceful context of the surrounding countryside, rather than a view from within the city itself. This echoes a move by the Impressionists in the late nineteenth century to depict the leafy banlieue surrounding Paris which, like Tallinn, had undergone immense industrialisation and change.