SPHINX FINE ART



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

A Russian Fête Champêtre

pen and black ink and grey wash, over traces of black chalk, on paper
oval; 38 x 33.5 cm (15 x 13⅛ in)

A Russian Fête Champêtre depicts a popular subject for Jean-Baptiste Le Prince and his contemporaries: a *fête champêtre* style party, where a couple dance in a leafy setting. While the term is derived from the French expression for a 'pastoral festival' or 'country feast' and, in theory, was a simple form of amusement, in practice, at least in the eighteenth century, a *fête champêtre* was often a very elegant form of entertainment involving on occasions whole orchestras hidden in trees, with guests sometimes in fancy dress. Le Prince's work displays this theme in a completely Russian context: the variety of Russian folk costume and the depiction of a *domra* (a Russian string instrument) add exoticism to the scene.

Le Prince lived in Russia from 1758 to 1763, joining a large number of French artists who were working there, and teaching at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. It seems that he travelled around the country a great deal, making sketches of Russian life which provided subjects for much of his work when he returned to France. Indeed Le Prince's oeuvre contains many scenes of Russian dances. He received a major commission in 1764 to provide illustrations for the Abbé Jean Chappe d'Auteroche's *Voyage en Sibérie,* a deluxe publication which helped encourage the fad for 'russeries'. Le Prince's work shows the influence of his French predecessor Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), who was known for his lyrical depictions of gentlemen and ladies engaged in intimate conversation with music in

park-like settings, such as his Fête Champêtre. Watteau's figures are depicted in a graceful and poetic manner, consistent with the light-hearted style of Rococo art. This style can also be seen here in Le Prince's *A Russian Fête Champêtre,* which is drawn with elegant form and with a delicate, balanced composition. Another key comparison is the work of Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), a French painter and printmaker whose late Rococo manner was distinguished by remarkable facility, exuberance, and hedonism. One of the most prolific artists active in the last decades of the *ancien régime,* he executed many genre paintings conveying an atmosphere of intimacy and veiled eroticism, which are amongst his most popular work. These characteristics can also be seen in Le Prince's work, similarly created in the decadent Rococo manner which marked the last decades of pre-French Revolution frivolity.

Le Prince 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 (1703-1770), thanks to the patronage 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. Le Prince was also inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish genre and landscape painters. By July 1757 Le Prince had arrived in St. Petersburg. Well received by the French envoy, the Marquis de l'Hôpital, he received over forty commissions to execute overdoor pictures for the Empress Elizabeth (1709-1762) in the newly constructed Winter Palace, and further orders from Peter III (1728-1762). Le Prince is said to have travelled extensively in Russia, according to some as far as Siberia, and his prints show a knowledge of the north-western and western Empire. The drawings he made in Russia provided the basis for a considerable body of work that added to the general taste of the eighteenth century for exotica.

Many scenes of Russian dances are known in Le Prince's oeuvre, but the present drawing is very close in composition to a painting formerly in a private collection, New York.[1]

[1] See Rorschach, K., *Drawings by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince for the 'Voyage en Sibérie', exhibition catalogue,* (Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, 1986), p. 34, no. 38, reproduced.

Provenance:

Jean Cailleux (bears his collector's mark, not in Lugt)

Exhibitions

London, Matthiesen Gallery, *Exhibition of French Master Drawings of the 18th Century*, n.d., no.45;

Paris, Galerie Cailleux, Eloge de l'Ovale, 1975, no. 17

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 lll (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.