SPHINX FINE ART

Aleksandr Evgen'evich Yakovlev (St. Petersburg 1887 - Paris 1938)

A Desert Fort

signed in Cyrillic (lower right)
red chalk on paper
46.3 x 61.6 cm (18¼ x 24¼ in)

Aleksandr Evgen'evich Yakovlev's *A Desert Fort* demonstrates his brilliance as a draughtsman. By exploiting the grain of the paper with just red chalk, he manages to create a variety of textures. From the whipped-up sand dunes with their spiky dry grasses, and the wispy clouds, to the heavy shadows created by this ancient fort, or *qala,* Yakovlev cleverly evokes the barren landscape of Karakalpakstan.

Karakalpakstan is a remote isolated area, surrounded by desert sands in every direction. To the east, the sands of the Qizil Qum stretch as far as Bukhara. To the south, the empty Qara Qum desert reaches the foothills of the Kopet Dag and Ashgabat. To the west, the barren rocky plateau of the U'stirt extends to the shores of the Caspian Sea. To the north, an enormous barren landscape of desert and salty lakes eventually merges into the Russian steppes and the frontier towns of Orenburg and Samara.

Despite its desolate landscape, Karakalpakstan contains the largest number of important archaeological sites relating to the ancient civilization of Khorezm. During the second half of the first millennium B.C., and the first half of the first millennium A.D., the whole region was a thriving agricultural oasis, supported by a huge network of man-made irrigation channels. Its population believed in the Zoroastrian cult of fire. They were governed by a dynasty of Khorezmshahs who lived in richly decorated palaces and they were defended from nomadic attack by an elaborate system of garrisons stationed in sophisticated mud-brick fortresses with an advanced military design.

The remnants of several of these citadels, fortresses, castles and other sites, known as *qalas,* many of which date back almost two thousand years, still exist today. The number of existing *qalas* in Karakalpakstan, many of which are un-named, is unknown, but is believed to be in the hundreds. However, many smaller forts were destroyed and ploughed over during the agricultural development of the 1960s and 1970s. By comparing photographs from Sergei Tolstov's Khorezm archaeological expedition of the late 1930s, one can also note the considerable and devastating erosion which many of

the remaining qalas have suffered over the last sixty years. Much of this erosion was as a result of archaeological works being left uncovered, and it is plausible that the fort depicted by Yakovlev no longer exists.

From information taken from Tolstov's expedition one can see similarities between some of the sites and the fort depicted by Yakovlev. One such example is the site known as Ayaz Qala 2, which like Yakovlev's fort was built on an elevated plateau. Part of a group of three *qalas,* Ayaz Qala 2 is a feudal fort probably dating from the 6th to the 8th centuries A.D. During this period, as Khorezm expanded and grew prosperous, a new class of feudal landowners emerged. Known as *dihqans,* they lived in square-shaped forts called *donjons* surrounded by a defensive wall, generally located at the head of the canal that watered their agricultural lands.

Yakovlev's desert fort, possibly also a feudal fort, was probably built with blocks of compacted clay or mud, as was typical of *qalas.* By solely employing the use of red chalk, Yakovlev emphasises the composition of the fort's structure. Yakovlev's fort boasts crenulations on its outside walls, some of which are rounded, recalling the walls of Bukhara. Two tall rectangular towers dominate the perimeter wall, and although this is not visible from the present angle, Yakovlev's fort was probably accessed via a single fortified entrance. A single row of arrow slits runs around the entire perimeter, which in addition to the crenelated parapet, provided a double archer's gallery.

Artist description:

Aleksandr Evgen'evich Yakovlev (Russian, 1887-1938) was a Russian painter, graphic artist and designer. His initial training in 1905–13 was at the Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg, where he studied principally under Dmitry Kardovsky. From 1909 Yakovlev contributed regularly to national and international exhibitions, and he was a member of both the World of Art group and the Union of Russian Artists. He was awarded an Academy scholarship for study in Italy and Spain in 1914–15, an experience that left an indelible mark on his stylistic evolution, as is clear from his recourse to Italian Renaissance devices and motifs in paintings such as his portrait of the Mexican artist *Roberto Montenegro* and *The Violinist* (both 1915; St Petersburg, Rus. Mus.)

Just before the October Revolution of 1917 Yakovlev and his close friend Vasily Shukhayev were regarded as the representatives of a new classicism in Russian art, and, in fact, the graphic clarity and materiality of their drawings and paintings bring to mind the contemporary poetry of Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Kuzmin, leaders of the Acmeist movement. Yakovlev, Shukhayev, Grigor'yev, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and other graduates of the Academy of Arts moved in the same circles as these literati, frequenting the cabarets in St Petersburg and contributing to Sergey Makovsky's review *Apollon*. Artistically and temperamentally, Yakovlev and Shukhayev were very close, and their red chalk and sanguine portraits and figure studies are often remarkably similar to each other. Their collaborative double portrait as *Harlequin and Pierrot* (1914; St Petersburg, Rus. Mus.) summarizes their mutual sympathy and respect.

In 1916 Yakovlev became a professor at the Institute of Art History in Petrograd (now St Petersburg), and, together with Grigor'yev and Sergey Sudeykin, he designed the interior of the Prival Komediantov (Comedians' Halt) cabaret in Petrograd. After travelling in Mongolia, China and Japan he settled in Paris in 1920. He achieved his reputation in the West as an ethnographical draughtsman: in 1925 he accompanied the Citroën Central Africa Expedition as an official artist and in 1931 did the same for the Citroën Trans-Asiatic Expedition, collaborations that resulted in superb depictions of native types, rituals and scenes. Yakovlev spent three years as Chairman of the Department of Painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, and returned to Paris in 1937.