SPHINX FINE ART



Ilya Yefimovich Repin (Chuguyev, Ukraine 1844 - Kuokkala (modern Repino, near St. Petersburg) 1930)

View of Krasnoye Selo

signed with initials, and inscribed and dated in Cyrillic '1st August 76/ Krasnoe Selo' (lower right)
pencil on paper
9.5 x 15 cm (3¾ x 5⅞ in)

Artist description:

One of the most celebrated painters of the nineteenth century, Ilya Yefimovich Repin was the leading advocate of the Russian Realist style. Greatly admired for his genre painting, his representations of historical and religious themes, as well as for his portraits of the Russian intelligentsia, he showed great concern in his work for contemporary socio-political issues. Repin's profound impact on Russian art continued to provide a wealth of inspiration to Russian artists for many years to come.

Repin came from very humble beginnings: as the son of a 'military settler', he was born into a lowly peasant class. His early training included work with an icon painter, which in time led to Repin to receive his own commissions from various churches. In 1863 Repin moved to St. Petersburg and by 1864 he had enrolled at the Imperial Academy of Arts. His first major piece, *The Raising of Jarius' Daughter,* won him the gold medal in the academic competition of 1871, and with it a travel scholarship. More notably however, it was during this period that Repin commenced work on the *Barge Haulers on the Volga*. When it was finally exhibited in 1873 Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* aroused great public interest. It marked a change in Russian painting and a move towards social realism and the depiction of the grim hardship of working class life. *Barge Haulers on the Volga* remains one of Repin's greatest masterpieces, one that he later considered to be his first professional painting and which helped cement his reputation as a documenter of social and political inequalities. With this painting, he defined himself as the future master and leader of critical realism.

In a letter to the editor of the St. Petersburg Gazette, in 1873, Vladimir Stasov said of *Barge Haulers on the Volga*: 'with a daring that is unprecedented amongst us [Repin] has abandoned all former conceptions of the ideal in art, and has plunged head first into the very heart of the people's life, the people's interests, and the people's oppressive reality... no one in Russia has ever dared to take on such a subject... in the plan and expression of his painting Mr. Repin is an important, powerful artist and thinker, but as well as this he also wields the tools of his art with such strength, beauty and perfection as

does scarcely any other Russian artist... for this reason it is impossible not to foresee the richest of artistic futures for this young artist'.

Repin left Russia in 1873 on his travel scholarship, which took him to Italy and Paris. It was there that he rented a studio in Montmartre. His immediate circle of Russian expatriates at this time included Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), Vasily Polenov (1844-1927), and Konstantin Savitsky (1844-1905). Whilst in Paris he also gained the acquaintance of Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) and Émile Zola (1840-1902) and a familiarity with contemporary trends, in particular the work of Édouard Manet (1832-1883). At this time French art had begun to depart from the work of the Realists and move towards Impressionism. Repin, however, remained a Realist, although stylistically one can see an influence of the new style on his work, particularly in his use of light.

Repin returned to St. Petersburg in July 1876 and a few years later, in 1878, he joined the *Peredvizhniki,* or 'The Wanderers'. Not only did 'The Wanderers' mark a stylistic revolution in Russian art but they also epitomised a change in artistic thought, and on how art was viewed and received. Their aims included the aesthetic goal of forming a new artistic sense and taste, the economic objective of attracting new buyers in order to have a market for the new art, and the enlightenment of people by allowing them an opportunity to learn about the new Russian art. By exhibiting their works throughout the provinces, the Peredvizhniki made their art accessible to all. From 1871 to 1923 the society arranged forty eight mobile exhibitions in St. Petersburg and Moscow, which subsequently travelled to Kiev, Kharkov, Kazan, Orel, Riga, Odessa and other cities. In this way Repin's art was exhibited to the masses, and in return, the masses appreciated his work, for Repin understood and represented their concerns. By this point, Repin's *oeuvre* had developed to reflect the political mood of this era, and he applied his realistic style to political concerns and social realism. In particular, his works were centred on the Russian revolutionary movement: *Arrest of a Propagandist, Refusal to Confess* and *They Did Not Expect Him* are three examples. These themes were also mirrored by the great Russian authors of the time, such as Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Dostoevsky (1821-1881).

They Did Not Expect Him, is considered by critics to be the finest achievement of the *Peredvizhniki* social point of view of and is an excellent example of Repin's brilliance at capturing emotion. The painting depicts a family stunned by the unexpected return of a political exile: the exiled man, clutching his hat, hesitates in the middle of the room, but instantly catches recognition in his mother's gaze. The frail woman rises from her armchair in surprise. His wife, at the piano, stops playing. The little girl at the table looks at the figure suspiciously, not remembering her father, but the boy recognises him instantly, his face beaming. The way Repin has carefully placed the figures in the setting allows the viewer's eyes to follow the direction of the floor-boards and see the exiled man immediately. It has been suggested that the use of the floor-boards and their exaggerated perspective is an influence of Edgar Degas (1834-1917). The luminous quality of the work makes this scene joyous, despite the seriousness of the topic and the work's obvious political overtones, and hints at the influence of the Impressionists.

In the summer of 1879 Repin stayed at Abramtsevo, the artists' colony set up by the wealthy Russian patron Savva Mamontov (1841-1918), whom Repin had previously met during his stay in Paris in the early 1870s. The colony sought to recapture the quality and spirit of traditional Russian art. Through exploring folklore and medieval Russian art, the artists were encouraged to celebrate their national heritage. Whilst there Repin painted various scenes of peasant life and from this period of Slavic Revival he also produced *The Zaporozhian Cossacks*, and was further moved to depict the Russian legends, exemplified by several versions representing the legendary hero Sadko.

Repin's artistic repertoire also included portrait painting, such as Fedor Chaliapin. He was praised for his ability to observe the character and psychology of his sitter and communicate their true personality. This skill is demonstrated in the series of portraits he executed of the literary luminary, Tolstoy. In *Portrait of Leo Tolstoy as a Ploughman on a Field,* Repin portrays Tolstoy as a peasant working the land, showing a simple man who is at one with his motherland. It is both a humble work and one of national pride. Equally, his portrait of the terminally ill Modest Mussorgsky, painted in 1881 during the composer's last dying days in hospital, is one of frank observation, but also instils the viewer with a great sense of compassion.

Later in his life, Repin returned to the Imperial Academy of Arts, where he taught from 1894 until 1907. By this time he had moved to his estate, Penaty, which he designed himself, in the Finnish village of Kuokall situated outside of St. Petersburg. This estate soon became an established centre of Russian artistic and literary activity in the early twentieth century. Following the 1917 October Revolution, Finland declared independence and Repin was invited to return to his homeland, but he refused and remained in Penaty till his death in 1930. His last painting, a joyous and exuberant canvas called *The Hopak,* was on a Ukrainian Cossack theme.