SPHINX FINE ART



Nikolaj Leontjewitsch Benois (St. Petersburg 1813 - St. Petersburg 1898)

Hospice de St. Olga, St. Petersburg

indistinctly signed, variously inscribed in Cyrillic and indistinctly dated '28... 1848' (lower right)
pencil and watercolour on paper
15 x 24.5 cm (6 x 9¾ in)

A grand building designed in the classical tradition stands on the corner of two roads populated by carriages and horsemen. The detail in *Hospice de Ste. Olga, St. Petersburg* is extraordinary, whether in the delicately painted tack of the horses or in the shadows of the brickwork and entablature behind. That Nikolai Leontjewitsch Benois was an architect is evident in his meticulous draughtsmanship and faultless rendering of mathematical perspective.

The building pictured is St. Olga's hospice and it is very likely that it was in fact designed by Benois. His brightest architectural period is thought to be between 1847 and 1858 when, as the court architect, he was commissioned to build numerous projects including the court stables, the station pavilion and the Court Ladies' buildings.

This watercolour reveals that whilst the building was positioned at the intersection of two roads, suggesting that the house was part of a regular and planned layout, there are no buildings around it which intimates that this was a new building or a proposed new building. *Hospice de Ste. Olga, St. Petersburg* hence could be regarded either as a view of the proposed building for the sponsor of the project, or as a retrospective picture, celebrating its construction.

Originally, a hospice provided shelter or a place of rest for weary or sick travellers undertaking lengthy journeys. However, the Hospice of St. Olga would have been more like the modern conception of the term, rather than a place of shelter for weary travellers to St. Petersburg.

Benois was the founding member of an artistic dynasty. His father, Louis Jules Benois (1770-1882), was a confectioner and arrived in Russia from France in 1794, but Nikolai became an architect rather than following in his father's footsteps. Nikolai immersed his own children in art and among his many talented descendents were famous painters, composers and set designers including Alexandre Benois (1870-1960). There exists a museum in St. Petersburg, held in part of one of Nikolai's buildings, solely dedicated to celebrating the artistic achievements of the extraordinary Benois family.

Benois had studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, producing designs that were influenced both by the tradition of the Renaissance villa and by Count Aleksandr Stroganov's (1794-1814) neo-Classical *dacha* (1796, by Andrey Voronikhin (1759-1814)). Benois' design for the College of Jurisprudence (1836) was awarded the Academy's Great Gold Medal. This graduation project contained reminiscences of Classicism, as did his project for a museum one year earlier.

Benois began to practise as an assistant to Konstantin Andreyevich Ton (1794-1881), an adherent of the Russo-Byzantine style, working as a draughtsman on the construction of the cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow (1832-1880, destroyed 1930s). In 1840 he visited Germany, where he made drawings of Romanesque buildings in Speyer, Worms and Cologne. In Munich, his most significant influence came from the Staatsbibliothek (1832-1843) by Friedrich von Gärtner (1791-1847). In Italy, together with Aleksandr Krakau (1817-1888) and Aleksandr Rezanov (1817-1887), Benois took the measurements of Orvieto Cathedral (1842-1846), a major undertaking which influenced his later work.

Artist description:

Benois was born to French parents in Russia. From 1827 his first tutor at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts was Ivan Gomzin (1784–1831), but in 1831 Kh. F. Meyer (1789–1848) replaced him. Under the latter's guidance, Benois produced a design for a *house of a rich landowner* (1834) that was influenced both by the tradition of the Renaissance villa and by Count Aleksandr Stroganov's Neo-classical dacha (1796; by Andrey Voronikhin) in St. Petersburg. Benois's design for the College of Jurisprudence (1836) was awarded the Academy's Great Gold Medal. This graduation project contained reminiscences of classicism, as did his project for a museum a year earlier (awarded the Great Silver Medal).

Benois began practice as an assistant to Konstantin Ton, an adherent of the Russo-Byzantine style, working as a draughtsman on the construction of the cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow (1832–80; destroyed 1930s). In 1840 he visited Germany, where he made drawings of Romanesque buildings in Speyer, Worms and Cologne. In Munich his most significant influence came from the Staatsbibliothek (1832–43) by Friedrich von Gärtner. In Italy, together with Aleksandr Krakau (1817–88) and Aleksandr Rezanov (1817–87), Benois took the measurements of Orvieto Cathedral (1842–6), a major task that influenced his later work.

In Italy, in 1845, he met Nicholas I (reigned 1825–55). A year later, back in Russia, the Emperor commissioned the young architect to design various objects of applied art, which he executed in rocaille style. His success with these pieces opened the way to commissions for a number of buildings at Peterhof: the Court (or Gothic) Stables (1847–54), his best-known building, for which he received the title of Academician; the Post Office Building (with his father-in-law Al'bert Kavos, 1850); the Novy Peterhof Railway Station (1854–8; commissioned by the owner of the line, Baron Stieglitz). In all these buildings Benois employed the 'Gothic' style, a term that in Russia at this time implied the use of prototypes, both English (the Tudor style in the stables, for example) and Italian (as in the motifs from Orvieto Cathedral in the station building). The artist's work in this style forms as important a stage in the history of Russian architecture as Adam Menelas's *Cottage* (1829), also at Peterhof.

As a master of eclecticism, Benois worked simultaneously in several styles. At the imperial residence at Peterhof he designed buildings for the maids of honour (1854); the architecture is intentionally close to the Baroque style of Bartolomeo Francesco Rastrelli's Great Palace (1747–52). Along with the neo-Baroque works of Andrey Shtakenshneyder, they are among the most important examples of this style. Benois's religious architecture passed through several phases: he produced variations on themes from Old Russian architecture, as in the church in the village of Vysokoye, Smolensk province (1868), in imitation of the 17th-century church at Ostankino, as well as designs in which the Russian style blends with the neo-Romanesque, as in the churches at Lisino and Tikhvin (both 1858; St Petersburg province), and 'purely' neo-Romanesque buildings such as the Catholic church of St Mary on the Vyborg Side in St Petersburg (1857; bell-tower 1877–8; now destroyed).

Benois also designed two important complexes: the imperial hunting palace with a school for apprentice foresters and the church, all at Lisino (1852–early 1860s), and one of the last examples of

an estate ensemble, at Vysokoye, where in 1867–73 he erected a house, a stud farm, an aviary, a dairy, a greenhouse, a granary and the church, all in different styles, mainly Russian and Gothic Revival. Although in 1872 he was awarded the Great Gold Medal at the Polytechnical Exhibition in Moscow for his designs and drawings, Benois actually built very little: to those buildings already listed can be added a theatre (1864–7; rebuilt 1936) in Helsinki. During the last years of his life Benois worked mainly for city institutions: from 1868 he was a councillor at the city *duma*, while from April 1873 until his death he was head of the city authority's building department, and he was president of the St Petersburg Society of Architects (1890–93).

By his marriage to Camilla Cavos, daughter of the architect who designed Mariinsky Theatre, Nicholas had three sons. Of these, Alexander Benois specialised in stage design, Albert Benois was a painter, and Leon Benois became a distinguished architect.