SPHINX FINE ART



Baron Mikhail Konstantinovich Klodt von Jurgensburg (St Petersburg 1832 - St Petersburg 1902)

Under the Birch Trees

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1874' (lower right)
oil on canvas
27 x 47.5 cm (10½ x 18¾ in)

This delicate and precise rendering of the Russian countryside demonstrates why the landscapes of Baron Mikhail Konstantinovich Klodt von Jürgensburg are so celebrated. A lady and two children are resting under the shade of some towering birch trees. These figures are well dressed and clearly at leisure, and perhaps they are part of the family who own the vast estate that stretches away into the horizon. The picture itself is divided into two definable halves; the wood on the left-hand side, dominating the foreground, and the open sundrenched field that spills over the right-hand of the canvas, stretching into the distance where large haystacks can be seen, which suggest that perhaps it is harvest time.

Many of the elements found in *Under the Birch Trees* help explain why Klodt is considered to be such a major figure in Russian landscape art. Compositionally the work is simply but effectively composed. The line of trees together with the edge ridge, upon which the wood sits, and the slightly worn path, all come together to form a vanishing point. The line of the trees is an especially effective device; their tops are cut off by the edge of the canvas suggesting dizzying heights. Furthermore the way that they rhythmically recede into the scene recalls the columns of a great cathedral receding along a nave, thus imbibing them with a sense of grandeur and monumentality. These strong verticals also contrast effectively with the flatness of the Russian landscape, which seems to stretch away endlessly to the horizon, interrupted only by the hulking haystacks. Despite having two distinct halves, Klodt unifies the picture by using a palette dominated by greens, yellows and browns, until eventually giving way to the soft white and blues of the sky. Amongst this unified palette the splash of red of the young girl's dress adds a small spark of vitality to the scene. The palette not only harmonises the wide open landscape but also demonstrates the subtlety of Klodt's colouring.

One of the most notable features of *Under the Birch Trees* is Klodt's ability to convey the variety of textures in the landscape. In the foreground there are the contrasts between the brittle crispness of the

fallen branches, the dry dustiness of the path or the moistness of the moss clinging to the tree, amongst others. Klodt's skill is such that features such as the bark of the tree feels tangible to the viewer.

The way that Klodt has monumentalised the foreground, with seemingly insignificant features painted in minute detail, is typical of his work. For example in *Viewof Normandy (Summer Day)* (Yaroslavl Art Museum, Yaroslavl), the focus of the work is the splintered tree trunk and the two large oaks under which they lie. This humble foreground is painted with the same precision that can be seen in *Under the Birch Trees.* In both works the figures are only vaguely defined. They serve as generic staffage, whose purpose is to animate the landscape but not to distract from it. The two works are comparable in terms of composition, with the detailed looming foreground on the left-hand side, giving way to an expansive landscape which eventually merges with the sky on the horizon. In *Viewof Normandy (Summer Day)* these compositional bands are clearly delineated by colour, whereas in the present work, painted fourteen years later, Klodt's colouring has become more sophisticated.

Klodt was clearly fascinated in depicting forests, and they feature repeatedly in his work throughout his career. In *Pinewood* (Vologda Regional Picture Gallery, Vologda) he demonstrates a similar interest in capturing the soaring height of the trees. The slender forms of the tree trunks and diminutive figures emphasise the trees' height in both works. In Pinewood this feeling of height is exacerbated by Klodt's use of a portrait format, although this means the forest isn't contextualised within the overall landscape as it is in *Under the Birch Trees.* Compositionally, it is worth noting that Klodt uses the path in all these works to lead the eye back into the landscapes, which emphasises the depth of the scenes and prevents them from becoming too static.

Another notable feature of *Under the Birch Trees* is Klodt's manipulation of light, which is also a major concern in his *Woodland (Walk in the Birch Forest)* (Perm State Art Gallery, Perm). The rounded nature of trees creates a natural challenge for the artist in terms of the modelling of light, one which Klodt responds to masterfully. In both works the viewer is also presented with the contrast between the dappled light seeping through the canopy of the trees, and the open spaces bleached by sunshine. The present work is typical of Klodt's use of light; he tended to use a soft, warming glow, and so although the scenes are brightly lit, there is no sense of intense, oppressive heat.

Klodt was a founding member of the Peredvizhniki ('Wanderers') group, and his work is comparable to that of other members of the group, perhaps most notably that of Ivan Ivanovich Shishkin. Shishkin of course spent much of his career focusing on the depiction of trees, and, although Klodt's landscapes are more diverse, works such as *In the Grove,* (State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) are comparable to *Under the Birch Trees.* Although Shishkin's work is more contained, lacking the wide open spaces of *Under the Birch Trees,* there is a similar focus on the Russian landscape as the central subject. In both works the figures are minor details and it is nature which is monumentalised. This is not nature at it most dramatic or awe-inspiring, as depicted in the sublime landscapes of the earlier European Romantic artists, but nature as its most everyday and humble, a Realist interpretation. This is in contrast to some of Klodt's colleagues in the Peredvizhniki, most notably Ilya Yefimovich Repin, who focused on exposing the injustices of nineteenth-century Russian society through their art. The group shared a commitment to portraying Russia truthfully and in the case of Klodt this manifested itself in the accurate rendering of the Russian landscape. As Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906), one of the leading art critics of the period wrote, wrote that Klodt 'was attempting simply to seize Russian nature in all its simplicity and discretion, without any pretension or pomposity'.[1]

As can be seen in *Under the Birch Trees,* Klodt placed an emphasis on a tight technique which resulted in a highly accurate depiction of the Russian landscape. He was extremely traditional in his artistic views and taught landscape painting at the Imperial Academy of Arts in a dedicated class which he established with Alexei Petrovich Bogoliubov. He railed against the increasing trend of loose, fluid technique which he detected amongst his fellow artists. These views manifested themselves most notably in his strident criticism of his fellow Peredvizhniki member Arkhip Ivanovich Kuindzhi (1842-1910). As can be seen in *The Birch Grove,* (The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) Kuindzhi favoured broad brush strokes, flat areas of bold colour and dramatic, theatrical lighting, and Klodt's criticism of this, along with his refusal to resign his Professorship at the Academy, resulted in him leaving the Peredvizhniki in 1880.

Klodt was born in St. Petersburg into a noted family of artists. His father, Konstantin Karlovich Klodt (1807-1879), was a Russian wood engraver, and his uncle, Pyotr Karlovich Klodt (1805-1867), was a famous sculptor. He first learnt to draw at the Saint Petersburg Mining Cadet Corps, before moving to the Academy in 1851. He studied there until 1858, when he won a gold medal of the first degree, and with it the right to study abroad. This travelling scholarship enabled him to spend time in France, Switzerland and Italy. However, he cut his trip short, complaining that the foreign landscapes did not inspire him and were inferior to Russian ones. On his return he invested the remaining funds from his scholarship to travel around Russia. He eventually became an academician, and as mentioned earlier, ran a specialist landscape class.

Although a founding member of the Peredvizhniki, Klodt was never completely embraced by the society, even before his criticism of Kuindzhi. His loyalty towards the Academy sat at odds with many of the aims of the society, who objected to the strict traditional artistic approach of the institution. After this resignation his career started to go into decline, although he did continue to paint comparable scenes to the present work. His family life underwent an upheaval and he started to suffer major health problems. He died half-blind and financially broke in 1902, leaving behind a considerable artistic legacy, and is now considered a crucial figure in the development of Russian landscape art.

Born into a highly artistic and noble family, Klodt was the son of Konstantin Klodt, the first Russian wood engraver, and nephew of Peter Klodt von Jurgensburg, the famous Russian sculptor of the horsemen on Anichkov Bridge. He learnt to draw at the St. Petersburg Mining Cadet Corps and then at the Imperial Academy of Arts from 1851 to 1858 under Maxim Vorobiov, where he also received the title of 'Artist of the First Degree'. Other stipends included a Klodt eventually settled in St. Petersburg, gaining recognition for his paintings *High Road in Autumn, In the Field* and the *Forest Viewat Midday* (1878). Due to a conflict with Arkhip Kuindzhi over aesthetic values, Klodt left The Wanderers. He criticised Kuindzhi for his unorthodox use of forms, and flat areas of bold colours. More specifically, Klodt claimed that Kuindzhi also ignored the rules governing gradual transition of colours between tones and of exhibiting 'impressions' rather than a finished canvas. Half-blind and financially broken he died in 1902.

[1] Quoted in Shestinkov. A, *Zabytye Imena Russkaia Zhivopis' XIX Veka,* Moscow, p.125.

Artist description:

Baron Mikhail Konstantinovich Klodt von Jurgensburg was born in St. Petersburg, the son of Baron Konstantin Klodt, an engraver. His uncle Peter Klodt von Jürgensburg was a famous Russian sculptor. Mikhail Konstantinovich studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts under Vorobyev (1817-1888) from 1851 to 1858. He won a large Gold Medal from the Academy for his work, and received a scholarship for three years to study painting in France, Switzerland and Italy, but abandoned his trip a year later. On his return Klodt secured permission to use the rest of the scholarship funds to travel around Russia.

Klodt was a founding member of the *Peredvizhniki* or 'Wanderers' movement, but its members did not completely consider him as one of their own, partially due to his enduring link with the St. Petersburg Academy: between 1871 and 1886 Klodt directed the landscape painting studio there. After voicing a particularly sharp criticism of the movement, Klodt was forced to break with *Peredvizhniki.* Soon he retired from the Academy as well. He died almost blind and financially broken in 1902.