SPHINX FINE ART



Pyotr Petrovich Sokolov (St. Petersburg 1821 - St. Petersburg 1899)

Hunting with Borzoi

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1890' (lower right)
pen, brush and black ink and gouache on paper
45 x 63.5 cm (17¾ x 25 in)

In this dark and expressive drawing, Pyotr Petrovich Sokolov offers a snapshot of an exhilarating wolf hunt. In an almost wholly monochromatic palette, *Hunting with Borzoi* is set in a wild and sparse landscape, the sharp accentuated brushstrokes of the artist emphasising the harshness of this Russian hunting steppe and the drama of the event. Three athletic borzoi, or Russian wolfhounds, surround a small, panicked wolf cub. Their lean and athletic bodies, built purely for speed, provide too stern a match for the helpless wolf. Two further borzoi dash from the scrubland towards their prey, trapping it and dispelling any thought that it might escape. A burly hunter on horseback, stands tall in the stirrups of his horse, watching carefully. The dark intensity of the horse's eye captures the adrenaline and exhilaration of the chase. The hunter holds in his left hand a trailing rope, waiting to tie the wolf down; in his right he tightly grips both his crop and the reins.

Hunting was a recurring theme in Sokolov's work, which he explored in a variety of mediums throughout his career. The Tretyakov's *Wolf Hunting,* lacks the dynamism of the present work but still bristles with the energy of the pack. In the Tretyakov's painting the hunt is now over and the borzoi patrol around the captured wolf, the dogs' lithe athletic bodies contrasting with the elegance of the horse. However, there is still a sense of the potential power of the pack, and it is the energy of the hunt which led to Sokolov returning repeatedly to the subject.

In Tsarist Russia, before the Emancipation reform of 1861, wolf hunting was a pursuit reserved solely for the aristocracy and rich landowners. However, upon learning of the frequency of attacks on livestock and humans, the Ministry of Interior sent agents to Western Europe in order to learn how people there dealt with the problems. On their return, they devised a plan in 1846 which involved wolf bounties and government hunters. Each hunter was given jurisdiction to hunt in a specific area. They were given three roubles for each male killed and one and a half for each cub, with a tail presented as proof. Each hunter received an annual salary of sixty roubles provided he killed fifteen adults and thirty cubs each year. In 1858, after paying $1,250,000 for over a million wolves, officials became suspicious and discovered

that some hunters bought wolf pelts for low prices, cut them up and handed them over as tails. In the latter stages of the nineteenth century, Russian hunting societies began an energetic campaign against wolves. In 1897, members of the Moscow Hunting Society killed their first one thousand.

Sokolov came from a family of artists. His father Pyotr Fyodorovich Sokolov (1791-1848), studied at the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg from 1800 to 1810. Pyotr Petrovich studied under him and became a painter and printmaker. He travelled widely in Russia and painted a number of sharply observed genre scenes depicting the everyday lives of peasants, landowners and soldiers. He was also a leading book illustrator: his illustrations for the novel *Dead Souls* by Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) are especially renowned. These were executed in watercolour in the late 1880s and the 1890s and were produced in two cycles, the first in colour and the second in black and white. His interpretation of the text was intensely dramatic, verging on the grotesque, but was also extraordinarily detailed in its observation of everyday life.

Artist description:

Pyotr was from a family of Russian artists. His father Pyotr Fyodorovich Sokolov (Moscow 1791 - 1848 Stary Merchik, now in Kharkiv region, Ukraine), studied at the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg from 1800 to 1810 and continued to live there until 1846, when he moved to Moscow. He was the first Russian master to paint portraits only in pure watercolours, a technique that supplanted the miniature portrait during the period 1820–50. Sokolov's subtle lyricism, the delicacy of his use of colour, the lightness and vivacity of his style of painting and the sincerity of his interpretation of character all contributed to the widespread popularity of his portraits. Among Sokolov's best works are portraits of Nikita Murav'yov (1824), a leading member of the Decembrist conspiracy of 1825, General Nikolay Rayevsky (1826), hero of the War of 1812 against the French, and Aleksandr Pushkin (1836; all Pushkin, A. S. Pushkin Museum).

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