SPHINX FINE ART



Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (Metz 1734 - Saint-Denis-du-Port 1781)

Musician in a Russian Costume Seated by a Bed

Circa: 1775

signed and dated 'Leprince/ 1775' (lower left)
oil on panel
22.6 x 17.7 cm (8⅞ x 7 in)

In this work, the great chronicler of Russian culture, Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, has depicted a musician staring cheerfully out at the viewer. He is sitting on the edge of a bed, absentmindedly plucking his instrument, as the beginnings of a smile creep across his face. The armour he wears, and the bow which can be seen propped against the wall on the right hand side, suggests that he is be a soldier. As the figure relaxes, with his music and the flagon full of drink on the table beside him, a figure peers in from the background to see what is going on. There is a strong focus on the foreign and exotic nature of the figure, with his brightly coloured uniform and unusual musical instrument, a theme which recurs throughout Le Prince's work.

The main figure in *Musician in a Russian Costume Seated by a Bed* is one which Le Prince depicted on more than one occasion. For example in the print *Le Corps de Garde,* which was executed after a Le Prince painting of 1773, the same figure can be seen in the foreground. Although in the print he is surrounded by other soldiers, the musician is still the figure that attracts the viewer's immediate

attention, as he has the same engaging gaze and persona that is evident in the present work. The themes of music and revelry are common in Le Prince's work, whether they be slightly debauched scenes, such as Le Corps de Garde, or the more pastoral, peasant scenes for which he was also well known.

In terms of concise composition, *Musician in a Russian Costume Seated by a Bed* is also typical of Le Prince's work in oils. When using this medium he commonly produced a more focused depiction of one or two figures. The motif of a solitary musician in an interior was a particularly favoured subject, with paintings such as *Les Plaisirs de la Solitude* (Private Collection) clearly comparable to the present work.

Having studied under the leading French painter of the age, François Boucher (1703-1770), Le Prince arrived in St. Petersburg in 1757. He soon achieved great success in that city, receiving multiple commissions from both Empress Elizabeth (1709-1762) and her successor, Peter III (1728-1762). He travelled extensively throughout Russia, recording extensively its people, customs, costume and traditions. It was these sketches which he was to draw upon on his return to France, in addition to the miniature models of Russian buildings, wagons, sleighs, tools and clothing, which he had made to use as guides.[1] There was a general taste amongst French collectors for exotic subjects, and Le Prince's *russeries* were extremely popular. He demonstrated an almost ethnographic concern in his prolific rendering of Russian life, demonstrated by the present work. He also achieved enduring fame because of his significant contribution to printmaking, being the first artist to master the technique of aquatint.

---

[1] de Bachaumont, L. P., *Mémoires Secrets pour Servir à l'histoire de la République des Lettres en France, depuis MDCCLXII jusqu'à nos Jours,* (18 vols London, John Adamson, 1784), vol. 18, p.130.

Artist description:

Born to a family of ornamental sculptors and gilders, he became famous for creating a new kind of genre picture, based on the direct observation of Russian subjects, and also for perfecting aquatint technique. Sometime around 1750 he became a pupil of François Boucher, thanks to the protection of the Maréchal de Belle-Isle (1684–1761), governor of Metz. Boucher's saturated brushwork, highly finished surfaces and incisive drawing had a decisive impact upon the young artist, as did, perhaps, the diversity of his output. He was also inspired by 17th-century Dutch and Flemish genre and landscape painters.

Le Prince is said to have made a trip to Italy in 1754, fleeing from the much older wife whom he had married in 1752, but there is as much evidence against such a trip as for it. By July 1757 Le Prince had arrived in St Petersburg. Well received by the French envoy, the Marquis de l'Hôpital, he received more than 40 commissions to execute overdoors for the Empress Elizabeth in the newly constructed Winter Palace; he received more commissions from Peter III (1728–62). Le Prince is said to have travelled extensively in Russia, according to some as far as Siberia. His prints show a knowledge of the north-western and western Empire, but the number of imperial commissions that cover his entire sojourn from 1757 to 1762 makes it unlikely that he travelled as much as has been claimed. The drawings he made in Russia (e.g. Paris, Louvre) provided the basis for a considerable body of work that added to the general taste of the 18th century for exotica.

The years between 1763 and 1775 mark the summit of Le Prince's career and production. From 1764 to 1768 he was at work on drawings; Philadelphia, PA, Rosenbach Library, for the *Voyage en Sibérie*; Paris, 1768, of the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Chappe d'Auteroche (1728–69). In 1765 he was received (reçu) as a member of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture with a painting representing a *Russian Baptism* ; Paris, Louvre, and showed 15 pictures at the Paris Salon, all of Russian subjects. In 1769 Denis Diderot severely criticized one of his Salon exhibits, *Le Cabak* ; Stockholm, National Museum, for its lack of finish; Diderot, however, also praised Le Prince for his refined mastery of

aquatint technique. Between 1765 and 1768 Le Prince published several suites of etchings and aquatints on Russian themes, and he exhibited 29 sheets at the Salon of 1769. The popularity of his Russian subjects is also shown by his tapestry cartoons of *Russian Games*.

After 1770 ill-health caused Le Prince to retire to the Brie district near Paris. He then concentrated more on landscapes and pastoral subjects, such as *Landscape near Tobolsk*; Rouen, and the *Russian Festival*; 1770, Angers. Working from sketches executed from life and using models and actual costumes brought back from his travels, Le Prince introduced an almost ethnographic concern and exacting accuracy into his rendition of exotic subjects. Although these Russian pictures constitute the best-known aspect of his output, he also produced Classical subjects, such as *Anacreon*; Lawrence, U. KS, Spencer Museum of Art, and gallant genre pictures, such as *Fear*; Toledo, Ohio Museum of Art, as well as French landscapes.

Collections

Le Prince is represented in the following collections: Hermitage, St Petersburg; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery, London; Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, New Zealand; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College, Florida; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Musées de Lorraine, France; Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, amongst others.