

# S P H I N X F I N E A R T



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

## **The Russian Dance & The Seesaw**

the first signed and dated 'Le Prince 1769' (lower right) and the second bears a signature 'le prince' (lower left)

black chalk, pen and black ink, grey wash, en grisaille  
29 x 23.7 cm (11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in); 29 x 22.8 cm (11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9 in)

The present pair of drawings encapsulates the exoticism and sense of playfulness for which the work of Jean-Baptiste Le Prince is best known. *The Russian Dance* is one of Le Prince's best known images, due to its wide dissemination through print. A turbaned man and an elegant young woman are dancing together in a small clearing. They are accompanied by two musicians and watched by a small crowd huddled under the shade of a tent. In the foreground a Kalmyk archer, his quiver by his side, has turned away from the entertainment and placed his arm around the lady sitting beside him. The aquatint version of the present drawing was one of the works which Le Prince exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1769.

*The Seesaw*, seems to be set on the outskirts of a Russian village, with a wooden church dominating the background. A long plank of wood has been balanced on a rock to create a makeshift seesaw, which has sent a young girl soaring into the air. In front of them two small children struggle to pull a further three along on a sled. Surrounding them various figures enjoy the sunshine, whilst watching the youngsters at play.

The theme of Russian peasants at leisure, and more specifically music and dance were common themes in Le Prince's work. *A Russian Fête Champêtre* has only small variations from *The Russian Dance*, featuring many of the same figures and motifs. Similarly, the engraving also called *La Danse Russe*, which was used as an illustration in Jean-Baptiste Chappe d'Auteroche's (1722-1769) famous travelogue *Voyage en Sibérie*, is comparable to both of the present works (fig. 1). Again the central subject is that of a couple engaged in a dance whilst a crowd looks on. In all the works Le Prince's ethnographic interest is in evidence, as he tries to convey the exoticism of Russia to his French audience. He focuses on details such as the costume of his figures or the musical instruments which they play. This interest in the differences between Russian and French culture made his scenes the perfect accompaniments to Chappe's text. Although there is no comparable aquatint to *The Seesaw*, it does seem to relate to Chappe's description of 'Young women sometimes amuse themselves on nice days by jumping on a plank balanced on a log lying on the ground: they stand on the end of the plank and raise themselves by turns, five or six feet high, with the greatest skill'.<sup>1</sup> In 1786 Le Prince also executed a pair of paintings whose subjects correspond to those of the present drawings.<sup>2</sup>

Le Prince began his studies in Metz, but in 1750 was sponsored to go to Paris and become a pupil of François Boucher (1703-1770). In 1758 he moved to St. Petersburg, where he worked for Catherine the Great and spent five years travelling amongst the Russian people. The drawings he produced during this period served as the basis for the majority of his work upon his return to France, and his work was extremely popular due to their exotic nature. His russeries were part of the Rococo trend that saw foreign subjects and motifs, especially Chinese and Turkish, achieve great popularity. He exhibited regularly at the Salon, provided cartoons for tapestries and produced several collections of etchings and aquatints on Russian themes. In fact due to his pioneering role in the use of aquatint he left an enduring legacy to the art of printmaking.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Drawings by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince for the Voyage en Sibérie*, exhib. cat., (Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia, and other locations, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, nos. 37 & 38.

### **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.