

PETR PETROVICH VERESCHAGIN

(Perm 1834 - St. Petersburg 1886)

St. Olav's Church, Reval

signed twice in Cyrillic and dated '1864' (lower right), further inscribed in Cyrillic 'Reval' (lower left)

oil on canvas

27 x 36 cm (10 x 14 in)

PETR PETROVICH VERESCHAGIN'S WORK *ST. OLAV'S Church, Reval, Estonia* demonstrates the artist's meticulous attention to detail. In the foreground, some boys are fishing in the stream, while further away to the left, little girls are paddling in the same bubbling water. The picture, which positions the viewer in a hamlet just outside the city gates, is dotted with figures illustrative of village life, and overshadowed by the imposing silhouette of St. Olav's which dominates the town around it.

This church is believed to have been built in the twelfth century and to have been the centre for old Tallinn's Scandinavian community prior to the Danish conquest in 1219. It is dedicated to King Olaf II of Norway (995-1030), who was canonized in 1164 by Pope Alexander III (c.1100-1181). The first known written references citing the church date back to 1267. Local legend recounts that during the construction of the church, the mysterious architect who undertook the commission, upon completing his work, slipped and fell from the tower. When the man's body hit the ground, a snake and a toad crawled out of his mouth: he had called upon occult forces to build the enormous structure. A wall-carving commemorates this event in the adjoining Chapel of Our Lady.

The church was extensively rebuilt from the fourteenth century onwards. Around 1500, it reached a height of 159 metres. The immensely tall steeple was a useful maritime signpost, and ensured the trading city of Tallinn was visible from far out at sea. From 1549, St. Olav's was the tallest building in the world at 175 metres, but was struck by lightning in 1625, and the spire destroyed. The ambitious steeple has been struck by lightning at least eight times over the years, and the whole church has burned down thrice throughout its known existence. After a fire in 1820 the church was again rebuilt, and it was during this restoration that methods and principles of construction characteristic of a historical revivalist architecture were first applied in Estonia on a large scale. Following several subsequent reconstructions, St. Olav's overall height is now 123 metres (fig. 1).

Vereschagin trained at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg between 1858 and 1865. Having completed his studies at the Academy, he worked as a teacher and painted a large collection of views and landscapes. His works depicting cities and their landmarks include *View*



St. Olav's Church
spire, Tallinn
(Figure 1)

of Reval from Kadriorga (1864), *View of Dinaburg* (1867), *Market in the Nizznaiy Novgorode* (1867) and *View of the Kremlin* (1868). Collectively these works brought Vereschagin far-reaching fame and official acknowledgement: he was promoted from the second to the first degree of Academician of Landscape Painting in 1873. After eventually retiring from teaching, Vereschagin travelled extensively, painting the Caucasian landscape in *Sukhum-Kaleb*, Crimea in *View of Sevastopol from the Side of Malakhova Kurgana*, the Urals in *Red Stone and Chusovaya River*, and many more views of northwest Russia. During the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), he joined the active army and painted a number of pictures on their behalf. He maintained a preference for large-scale epic views, mountainous landscapes and detailed market and urban scenes.

