

ALBERT NIKOLAYEVICH BENOIS

(St. Petersburg 1852 - St. Petersburg 1937)

Silver Birches

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1904' (lower left)
oil on card
20.5 x 29.5 cm (8 x 11 ½ in)

IN *SILVER BIRCHES*, ALBERT NIKOLAYEVICH BENOIS has painted a scene of ethereal beauty, dominated by a sense of complete tranquillity. We see a forest of birch trees emerging from the mist, and their hazy form is reflected in the glass-like surface of the foreground water. This marsh feels completely isolated, the water and birches unruffled by any wind, and a couple of birds provide the only movement. The work is painted in a palette of cool blues and greys, which helps convey the soggy and muggy atmosphere of this wetland. Benois uses a mixture of broad washes and long thin brush strokes, the combination of which conveys the stillness of the landscape, together with its slightly wispy, delicate nature.

Much of Benois' work focuses on the quiet beauty of the landscape, and a work, such as *Sunset over the Lake*, see figure 1, has many of the same qualities as *Silver Birches*. In both paintings Benois has chosen to depict an isolated untouched landscape, dominated by a body of water. He seems to delight in his ability to render the surface of the water, where reflections from the surrounding landscape ripple almost imperceptibly. A cool palette is used in both works, which contributes to the still and tranquil mood of the scenes. Although neither landscape is awe-inspiring, Benois chooses to infuse his depictions with an unusual effect to enliven them; *Sunset over the Lake* is cast in the pink and orange hues of dusk, whilst *Silver Birches* is shrouded in the marsh mist.

Benois was one of the leading watercolourists of his generation, having been trained by Luigi Ossipovich Premazzi (1814-1891) (see inventory), an Italian who achieved great fame and success in Russia. Although *Silver Birches* is one of Benois' few surviving oils, in its use of broad wash effects the influence of his watercolour training can be seen. He travelled widely throughout Europe and Asia, sometimes accompanying the Royal Family at the invitation of Tsar Alexander III (1845-1881). He was appointed lecturer in watercolours at the Imperial Academy of Fine Art and was also a founding member of the Society of Russian Watercolours.

Benois' family is considered one of the great dynasties in Russian culture, although they were originally of French descent. Albert's father, Nikolai Leontjewitsch (1813-1898) (see inventory) was the famous architect of the Imperial Mariinsky Opera House in St. Petersburg, in addition to many other notable landmarks. Albert's brothers were Leonty (1856-1928), also an architect whose legacy to Russian architecture was considerable, and the great painter, stage designer and writer Alexandre (1870-1960). In the two decades before the Russian revolution the

three brothers were part of a circle that comprised the leading arbiters of aesthetic matters in St. Petersburg. Many other members of the family achieved great things in the arts, most notably Albert's niece Zinaida Evgenievna Serebriakova (1884-1967) (see inventory). Today there is a museum in St. Petersburg, solely dedicated to celebrating the achievements of this remarkable family.



Albert Nikolayevitch Benois, *Sunset over the Lake*, Private Collection (Figure 1)

