

ALEXANDER OSIPOVICH ORLOVSKY

(Warsaw 1777 - St. Petersburg 1832)

Six Roundels Depicting Horsemen

five signed with monogram: four dated '1815'; one dated '1816'

pencil and gouache with gum arabic on paper

each 9.8 cm (3⁷/₈ in) diameter (6)

mounted as one, in folder bound in red morocco leather with a plaque engraved 'à Michel Lanskoj'

IN THESE SIX ROUNDELS ALEXANDER OSIPOVICH Orlovsky depicts different horsemen. Two of the figures sit astride their steeds dressed in the thick armour of the heavy cavalry. They are accompanied by other soldiers and look out over extensive landscapes. One of them has drawn his sword, ready to commence battle. Two of the other roundels also depict cavalymen, although they are not as heavily protected. These figures appear to be cantering alongside their fellow soldiers, followed closely by other military figures. The remaining pictures depict figures whose livelihoods are also heavily dependent upon their horses. In one, a peasant family pauses to rest during a long journey. They have unharnessed their horse from the cart which is heavily laden with their possessions and the animal, temporarily freed from its burden, crops a thin patch of grass. The final image shows a man riding slowly home whilst leading another two horses. He has three animals, all of which are harnessed, suggesting that he is perhaps the driver of a troika, or a simple farmer.

Orlovsky painted at least five of the roundels between 1815 and 1816 and as a result they share certain stylistic traits. The horsemen, for instance, have been set against an extensive background and although they are relatively indistinct, each setting has been painted in a cool, muted palette. However, each roundel does contain a splash of bright colour, in the clothing of the figures, which enlivens the pictures.

Orlovsky depicted a variety of horsemen throughout his career, in different media. One such example, which bears strong similarities to the roundels, is his *Horsemen* (fig. 1). In this work an exotically dressed soldier, armed with a sword and a bow, has just reached the top of a hill on horseback. He has momentarily paused so that his companions can join him and he points something out to them in the distance. This compositional device, where a single primary figure is followed by a couple of companions, is one which Orlovsky employs in several of the roundels; the mountainous landscapes in which the figures travel are also comparable. There is a focus on the costume and the weapons of the central figure which is also a feature of the military roundels, as is the cool palette.

Orlovsky was born in Warsaw and his artistic training, under some of the leading Polish artistic figures of the day, was sponsored by Princess Isabella Czartoryska (1736-1816). He travelled extensively and produced a great deal in the early stages of his career, and developed a confident and elegant style which balances realism with imagination.



Alexander Osipovich Orlovsky, *Horsemen*, 1816,
The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Figure 1)

In 1799, Orlovsky served under Prince Józef Poniatowski (1763-1813) as a caricaturist before his work drew the attention of Tsar Alexander I (1777-1825), and in 1802 he moved to St. Petersburg. In Russia, Orlovsky was invited by Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich (1779-1831) to execute drawings of uniforms and military parades, which were subsequently engraved and prompted many other commissions. In St. Petersburg he came to know members of the liberal aristocratic intelligentsia and frequented the celebrated circle of the historian Aleksey Nikolayevich Olenin (1763-1843). Orlovsky frequently sketched the streets of St Petersburg and many of his drawings were strong in social commentary. Most of his paintings from this time, however, were scenes of battle and army life, as well as Romantic subjects featuring brigands and shipwrecks. In 1809 Orlovsky was awarded the title of Academician of Battle Painting of the St. Petersburg Academy of Art and during the conflict of 1812 he depicted many of the leading figures in the Russian army.

Orlovsky was also one of the first Russian artists to take up lithography, a medium in which he was prolific. He also retained, until his death, his great reputation as an inventive but gentle caricaturist. His work was much admired by contemporaries, both for its skill and for the diverse national character of the subjects. This diversity is strongly in evidence in *Six Roundels Depicting Horsemen*.



(Actual size)