

# MIKHAIL VASILEVICH NESTEROV

(Ufa 1862 - Moscow 1942)

## *Hayricks by the River*

signed (lower left)  
oil on board  
23.5 x 33.5 cm (9¼ x 13¼ in)

**T**HIS CALMING, COOL AND BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE by Mikhail Vasilevich Nesterov, *Hayricks by the River*, possibly depicts a view of the countryside in Abramtsevo, just outside of Moscow. Abramtsevo was the location of Savva Mamontov's estate.

It was here that Mamontov, a Russian railway tycoon, gathered influential figures from different artistic practices, be it music, art or literature, with the aim of creating a 'new' Russian culture. The Russian culture they envisaged was a revival of traditional Russian values in terms of religion and shared beliefs, and for Nesterov provided the inspiration to combine his realist style with a deep Orthodox belief.

It is with the importance of the Abramtsevo estate and Nesterov's interest in Russian Orthodox religion in mind, that we can relate *Hayricks by the River* with other works such as *Vision of Young Bartholomew*, which Nesterov started to paint during his time at Abramtsevo. Throughout his artistic *oeuvre*, Nesterov returned to depicting the landscape and started to paint the subject of young Bartholomew, who as a boy could not read or write. After praying and taking his cattle out, Bartholomew was visited by a *starets* (an elder of a Russian Orthodox monastery who was held as venerated adviser and teacher), who offered him a piece of proshpora to eat (a small loaf of bread used in Orthodox Christian liturgies, which magically enabled him to read. Bartholomew soon learned to read and eventually became a spiritual instructor to Prince Dimitry Donskoy (1350-89), and an enthusiastic supporter of the Prince's policy against the Tartar-Mongolian occupation. Bartholomew was canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church as Saint Sergiy Radonezhkiy and, more importantly, became a symbol of Russia's slaviv past.

The Russian countryside in *Hayricks by the River* is evoked through Nesterov's handling of rich, thick paint, which also demonstrates his awareness of Realist painters such as Gustav Courbet (cat. no. 56). There are, however, also elements of French *en plein air* painting as practiced by the Impressionists and which can be attributed to his training. Between 1877 and 1886 Nesterov studied at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture under the Realist painters Vasily Perov and Illarion Pryanishnikov. The Moscow School at the time encouraged a different style of painting to that of its counterpart in St. Petersburg. The liberal practice of going to nature and painting outdoors can be discerned from this image. Nesterov captures the atmosphere of the day through partly thick, and yet flat, brush strokes, creating subtle differences between the trees and the landscape.

All of Nesterov's canvases are marked by a lyrical synthesis between the figures and their landscape surroundings, as in *Hermit* (1888-9, Tretyakov



Mikhail Vasilevich Nesterov, *Vision of Young Bartholomew*, 1889-90, Tretyakov Gallery (Figure 1)

Gallery), which shows the stooped figure of an old man against a northern landscape of stunted trees and still water. This can also be said for *Vision of Young Bartholomew*, previously discussed. The slightly tighter and rhythmic brushstroke can be attributed to the influence of French artist Puvis de Chavannes, whose works Nesterov saw on a trip to Paris in 1889. De Chavannes's simplified forms, respect for the flatness of the picture surface, rhythmic line and use of non-naturalistic colour to evoke the mood of the painting appealed to both the Post-Impressionists and the Symbolists, and can be seen in Nesterov's *Hayricks by the River*.

In the 1880s to the 1890s Nesterov executed many wall paintings for churches, for example those that decorated the new church of St. Vladimir in Kiev, which had been built in the old Byzantine style in 1892. After 1900 he painted many of the famous figures of his day including *Leo Tolstoy* (1907, Tolstoy Museum, Moscow), and the psychologist *Ivan Pavlov* (1935, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). Nesterov continued to paint portraits of prominent figures including the sculptor *Vera Mukhina* in 1940 (Tretyakov Gallery). His most ambitious and large-scale pre-revolutionary painting was *The Heart of Moscow* (1916, Tretyakov Gallery), an attempt to present a generalised image of Russia on the eve of threatening and irreversible changes.

(The illustration here is shown in near actual size.)



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