

PYOTR PETROVICH SOKOLOV

(St. Petersburg 1821 - St. Petersburg 1899)

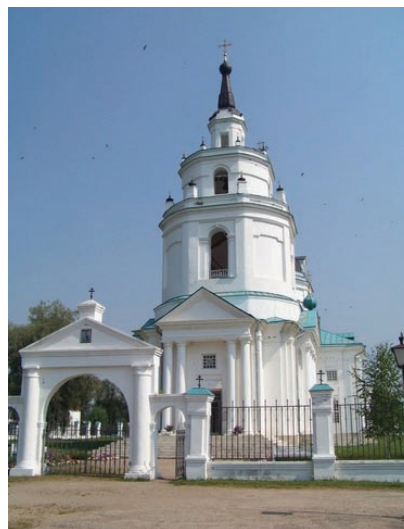
A Provincial Churchyard

signed with initials in Cyrillic and dated '1841' (lower right)
pencil and wash on paper
24 x 34 cm (9½ x 13½ in)

REVEALING A BRILLIANT COMMAND OF GRAPHIC technique, *A Provincial Churchyard* exudes a delicate tranquillity. Two people pass one another in the square as they go about their morning walk. A playful dog is the only aspect of the scene which breaks the quietude of the occasion, while his master makes a futile attempt to call him to heel. The church itself is small and intimate, bearing many of the features synonymous with Russian provincial architecture, including an octagonal dome and frontal bell tower. Despite the modesty of the church itself, one can assume from the size of the cemetery that this was an area of prominence. Tall trees in full leaf line the graveyard, which is full of opulent tombs, embellished with magnificent crosses.

Although the location of the church is unidentifiable, it is a typical example of the type of church that proliferated throughout the Russian countryside during the second half of the eighteenth century, as Catherine the Great's (1729-1796) predilection for the neo-Classical style in architecture influenced building tastes across the country. Although 'country estates and peasant settlements were free from building restrictions ...changes in rural building were generally in a direction that met with the empress' approval and accorded with her architectural tastes'.¹ A comparable church to the present one is the Assumption Church in the village of Boldino, see figure 1, which shares the same intimate grandeur. The church in Boldino was built in 1795 for the village by the local noble, Lev Aleksandrovich Pushkin (1723-1790), grandfather of the great writer, in the fashionable style of the time, and it seems probable that the building seen here was built in similar circumstances and at a similar time, as they both blend the prevailing European neo-Classical style with traditional Russian architectural motifs.

The present work is dated 1841, at which time Pyotr Petrovich Sokolov was studying at the Imperial Academy of Arts. The work contains indications that it may be by a young artist. The very deliberate recession, for example, is suggestive of an artist learning his craft. Sokolov's natural talent is



Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Boldino (Figure 1)

unmistakeable, however, in areas such as his handling of watercolour and his judgement of tone. Very little of Sokolov's early work of this period survives, and so *A Provincial Churchyard* is a valuable document on the initial stages of his career.

Sokolov was the son of Pyotr Fedorovich Sokolov (1791-1848), the noted portraitist who was patronised by many of Russia's aristocratic families. In addition to his father he also came under the direct influence of his uncle Karl Pavlovich Bryullov (see inventory), who was a teacher at the Imperial Academy at the same time that Sokolov studied there. His career took a very different course to his father's as he chose to diverge from the formal portraits for which his father was so well known. His work encompasses a range of rural subject matter, particularly hunting scenes with dogs, and peasant scenes.

¹ Shvidkovskii, D. O., *Russian Architecture and the West* (Yale University Press, 2007), p.267.

