

ISAAC ILICH LEVITAN

(Vibarty, Lithuania 1860 - Moscow 1900)

A River Landscape

inscribed in Cyrillic 'study by my brother, I Levitan, A Levitan' (lower right)
oil on board
14 x 21 cm (5½ x 8¼ in)

THIS CHARMING WORK IS A FINE AND TYPICAL example of the landscape studies that Isaac Ilich Levitan produced throughout his career. The landscape is divided into several distinct horizontal bands. In the foreground is the soggy riverbank, dotted with cows and horses, which is depicted in a soft green through which the brown of the sludgy mud seeps through. Beyond this is the broad violet band of the river, stretching across the composition before turning into the landscape on the left-hand side of the work. The far bank is depicted in a more intense shade of green, adding vitality to the work, before giving way to the muted colours of the sky, shrouded in wispy clouds.

A River Landscape bears an inscription from Levitan's brother, Adolf Ilich Levitan (1859-1933), authenticating the work. Adolf was also an artist, although he never achieved the success and renown of his brother. Following Isaac's death, Adolf organised an exhibition of his works in St. Petersburg, and it is common to see Isaac's paintings authenticated by Adolf in the same manner as *A River Landscape* (fig. 1).

A River Landscape is comparable to much of Levitan's output in his mature period, including a work such as *Lake*. During the 1890s his work developed from landscapes notable for their minute depiction, to more confident but less detailed sketches. In both *A River Landscape* and *Lake*, form is simplified and the relationship of the colour scheme grows in importance. Although his palette in both these works is relatively understated, there is great nuance and subtle variation in both, and both compositions are rooted around the beauty of the violet horizontal band. *A River Landscape* demonstrates a lyrical and laconic side of Levitan that is in evidence in many of his mature landscape studies.

Levitan was born into a poor Jewish community in rural Lithuania, and the family moved to Moscow around 1870. By 1877 Levitan and his siblings had been orphaned and cast into abject poverty, but as he and Adolf had already been students at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, they managed to obtain scholarships. It was at art school, that Levitan was introduced, through his fellow student Nikolai Pavlovich Chekhov (1858-1889), to Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904), who would become a lifelong friend and influence. As Averil King has pointed out 'he and Chekhov were well-matched intellectually and, significantly for Levitan's art, they shared a love of the Russian countryside, where they often walked together'.¹



Isaac Ilich Levitan, *Lake*,
Krasnoyarsk Museum of Art, V. I. Surikov, Krasnoyarsk (Figure 1)

In 1877 Levitan's works started to be publically exhibited and he soon developed a favourable reputation with both critics and collectors. In May 1879, after an assassination attempt on Alexander II (1818-1881), mass deportations of Jews forced Levitan to move to the suburb of Saltykovka, but officials relented after pressure from art lovers. During the 1880s Levitan began to exhibit with the Peredvizhniki, becoming a full member in 1891, and he worked closely with many of the leading Russian landscape painters of the period.

By the 1890s Levitan had achieved international renown, and was elected to the Imperial Academy of Arts, and named the head of the Landscape Studio. In the last year of his life, suffering from a terminal illness, he moved to the Crimea and stayed at Chekhov's house there. His last works were increasingly filled with light, reflecting the tranquillity and beauty of Russian nature. King says that 'Levitan's technique in portraying rural Russia involved the employment of simple compositions, a delicate and subtle tonality and, above all, a careful selection of motifs that would resonate with the viewer', qualities exemplified by *A River Landscape*.²

¹ King, A., *Isaac Levitan: Lyrical Landscape* (Antique Collectors' Club, Suffolk, 2011) p.12.

² Ibid., p.13.



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