

YURI ILLICH REPIN

(Chuguev 1877 - Helsinki 1954)

A Prisoner Transport

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1937' (lower centre)

oil on panel

37.5 x 32 cm (14¾ x 12½ in)

Provenance: Private Collection, Sweden

THE PRESENT WORK WAS EXECUTED BY YURI Illich Repin in 1937, when he lived in Kuokkala (Repino, Russia today) near the border of Finland and Russia. It was a harsh time for Repin's family, and the country as well, as Russia was steeped in the blood of Stalin's repressions. Before 1937, Yuri had experienced a deep emotional shock following the death of his wife (1929), his father (1930) and sister Nadezda (1931). In 1935, his son Diy disappeared, trying to illegally cross the border to get to Leningrad, with a desperate desire to join the Academy of Arts and follow in the footsteps of his famous father and grandfather. This led

Yuri to suffer from serious mental problems, making him a recluse and religious fanatic, worsening his already fragile health. He led a secluded life, was religious and inclined to mysticism.

One of his favourite subjects of that period was *Golgotha*, which he finished in 1938 and later exhibited in Helsinki. He said that he was choosing motifs from his dreams, as can be seen in figure 1, *The Nightmare of King Herod* or as inscribed on the canvas a *Vision*. The story behind this title is well-known and it can be compared to the present work, *A Prisoner Transport*. Both works were executed in a similar manner and almost at the same time, determined by the state of mind and the optimistic thoughts that were affecting the artist. They stand in contrast to the sweet academic landscapes or portraits of Soviet people that were common subjects for artists during that period. Here were dark and disturbing themes - these paintings were not addressed to an average viewer.

Although *A Prisoner Transport* is almost certainly an imagined scene, it can be seen as a microcosm of the severe repression Russia as a whole was suffering from during this period. Millions were sent to, and killed in, the 'Gulag' labour camps, where people were suffering from cold, hunger and diseases, and were punished by death for losing the energy to work.

Yuri Repin lived near the border of his collapsing native country, but he was safe, living in Kuokkala which was a part of Finland. Despite not witnessing the repressions represented in *A Prisoner Transport* himself, he showed the human disaster of those days. Exaggerated figures, looking like skeletons on their way to the prison camp are watching a cold-blooded scene of an unknown murder by one of the officers of the NKVD (secret police service).

Yuri Repin was not actively involved in politics himself, however, he must have been influenced by the forthright views of his father Ilya Yefimovich Repin (1844-1930). Due to Ilya's status as Russia's preeminent artist, his vocal opposition to Stalin's regime was significant. Russian officials had tried to repatriate Ilya in 1926, from the safety of Kuokkala, but were unsuccessful. Instead, they started issuing propaganda, insinuating Repin's support for the Bolsheviks. In this context, it seems unsurprising that Yuri paid close attention to the atrocities being committed in his homeland.



Yuri Repin, *The Nightmare of King Herod*, 1938,
Private Collection (Figure 1)

