

# ALEXEI ALEKSEEVICH HARLAMOFF

(Saratov 1840 - Paris 1922)

## *A Young Girl in Traditional Costume*

signed and dated 'Harlamoff/1881' (lower right)

black ink on paper

46 x 30 cm (18 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  in)

IN THIS FINELY DEPICTED INK DRAWING, A GYPSY CHILD stares out at the viewer, entrancing us with her large, round eyes. She meets the viewer's gaze with a neutral but alert expression, as she waits quietly and obediently for her portrait to be drawn; only her fidgeting fingers suggest the natural restlessness of a child. She is dressed in the simple garb of a gypsy: a long shawl, patterned with horizontal stripes over her shoulders, a simple headdress, large hooped earrings, a beaded necklace and



Alexei Alekseevich Harlamoff, *Young Peasant Girl*,  
Private Collection (Figure 1)

shoes that appear to be crudely cobbled together. Alexei Alekseevich Harlamoff depicts the young girl with short sharp pen-strokes, which he has built up to give the portrait a real sense of depth. His careful control endows the sitter with a delicate quality appropriate to her youth.

Harlamoff was renowned for his portraits of young girls chosen for their charming innocence and beauty, and the present work is a fine example of this type. A comparison between the present work and *A Young Peasant Girl*, see figure 1, shows both subjects paused on a country path. The two girls wear similar peasant costumes which creates an impression of charming simplicity. In both works the backgrounds have been portrayed with quick, expressive marks which demonstrate Harlamoff's talent for rendering light effects. In contrast to the impressionistic style used in the backgrounds, Harlamoff's handling in the depiction of the sitters' faces is soft and delicate, demonstrating an exceptional mastery of tone. The contrast in styles in both works adds vitality to the images, a device which Harlamoff used repeatedly throughout his career.

Born in Russia and educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Harlamoff moved to Paris in 1869, where he spent most of his life. Here he was taught by Léon Bonnat (1833-1922), one of the leading French artists of the day, who was to have a profound influence on Harlamoff's work. He started to exhibit regularly throughout the 1870s, which gained him critical acclaim; his portraits were praised by Émile Zola (1840-1902) as some of the best work of the 1875 Salon.

Harlamoff soon became a highly respected portraitist, with sitters including Tsar Alexander II (1818-1881) and Prince Anatole Demidoff (1830-1870). However, his most successful works were his masterful portraits of young girls, often dressed as peasants, who were painted purely for their beauty. There was a tradition in Russian art for painting this type of anonymous female portrait, dating back to the work of Pietro Antonio Rotari (1707-1762) (see inventory), and the critical and commercial success of Bonnat's works had led to a revival.

In 1880, Harlamoff was accepted as a full member of the Association of Itinerant Art Exhibitions, the most progressive and influential artistic group in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet despite this membership his 'art was more appreciated in Europe than in Russia' as Harlamoff was criticised in his homeland for his subject matter, which was said to show an indifference to the problems of Russian society.<sup>1</sup> In contrast his work was well received in Western Europe and charmed many viewers, including Queen Victoria (1819-1901) who admired his work at the Glasgow International Exhibition in 1888.

<sup>1</sup> Sugrobova-Roth, O. & Lingenauber, E., *Alexei Harlamoff: Catalogue Raisonné* (Düsseldorf, 2007), p. 7.



