

ULRIHS BOITMANIS

(Latvian, active c.1890)

View of Riga

signed 'A. Boitmann/1891' (lower right)

oil on canvas

61 x 110 cm (24 x 43 in)

THIS MAGNIFICENT, PANORAMIC VIEW OF RIGA shows part of the port area and the old town. In the foreground a schooner is moored, and further away several docked steamers testify to technological advancement and the consequences of the industrial revolution. The port in the distance is teeming with bustling figures, at the docks and on the land, reflecting Riga's status as one of the Russian Empire's key centres of trade. To the right, faithfully reproduced by Ulrihs Boitmanis, is the distinctive and instantly recognisable silhouette of the spire of St. Peter's Church that dominates the skyline. Further to the left is the spire of the Dome Cathedral, the Protestant cathedral of Riga, and the oldest church in Latvia, dating from the thirteenth century. Facing onto the embankment, is the distillery of A. Wolfshmidt, a brand which had the unusual distinction of not only being the vodka favoured by the Tsars, but also is the only vodka specifically cited as being drunk by James Bond, in Ian Fleming's novels.

Today Riga is the capital of Latvia and the biggest city in the Baltic states. Situated on the Baltic Sea coast at the mouth of the river Daugava, it was built on the site of an ancient Finnic tribal settlement. Due to its strategic position on the Baltic, it was a much sought-after city and came under the rule of several different countries over the centuries, including Poland, Sweden and Russia. Despite many centuries of war and changes of power the Baltic Germans long remained the dominant demographic in the city, if not necessarily in numbers then certainly in terms of power and influence. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, Latvians began to supplant Germans as the largest ethnic group in the city and subsequently Russian replaced German as the official administrative language in 1891, the year in which this work was produced. At this point the city was undergoing great changes and an immense growth in population: in 1881 the population was recorded as 169,300 and by 1897 it had jumped to 282,200. In 1900, the inhabitants of Riga were a quarter Latvians, a quarter Russians and half Baltic-Germans. The Wolfshmidt distillery reflects this ethnic mix, as close examination shows that it has the business' name emblazoned in both Roman and Cyrillic alphabets.

Although little is known about Boitmanis, there is a significant group



Ulrihs Boitmanis, *House of Dannenstern*, 1891,
Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation, Riga (Figure 1)

of paintings, including the present work, that date from the late 1880s and early 1890s, all of which depict different views or landmarks of Riga, for example his depiction of the House of Dannenstern, one of Latvia's best examples of Baroque architecture. Boitmanis' urban landscapes all feature the same cool palette and precise, detailed observation of Riga's architecture. Figures are used to animate his scenes but are invariably dwarfed by their surroundings. One potential reason that so little is currently known about Boitmanis is that his name has been transcribed incorrectly from his paintings: his first name has on occasion thought to have started with 'a' or 'j'. However, the Latvian art historian Romis Böhms (1927-1933) discovered references to a city landscape painter called Ulrihs Boitmann, and concluded this must be the painter of the group of exceptional Riga landscapes.



A. Böttmann
1891