

NIKOLAI LEONTJEWITSCH BENOIS

(*St. Petersburg 1813 - St. Petersburg 1898*)

Hospice de Ste. Olga, St. Petersburg

indistinctly signed, variously inscribed in Cyrillic and indistinctly dated '28... 1848' (lower right)
pencil and watercolour on paper
15 x 24.5 cm (6 x 9¾ in)

A GRAND BUILDING DESIGNED IN THE CLASSICAL tradition stands on the corner of two roads populated by carriages and horsemen. The detail in *Hospice de Ste. Olga, St. Petersburg* is beautifully depicted, whether in the delicately painted tack of the horses or in the shadows of the brickwork and entablature behind. That Nikolai Leontjewitsch Benois was an architect is evident in his meticulous draughtsmanship and faultless rendering of mathematical perspective.

The building pictured is St. Olga's Hospice and it is very likely that it was in fact designed by Benois. His brightest architectural period is thought to be between 1847 and 1858 when, as the court architect, he was commissioned to build numerous projects including the court stables, the station pavilion and the Court Ladies' buildings.

This watercolour reveals that whilst the building was positioned at the intersection of two roads, suggesting that the house was part of a regular and planned layout, there are no buildings around it which intimates that this was a new building or a proposed new building. *Hospice de Ste. Olga, St. Petersburg* hence could be regarded either as a view of the proposed building for the sponsor of the project, or as a retrospective picture, celebrating its construction.

Originally, a hospice provided shelter or a place of rest for weary or sick travellers undertaking lengthy journeys. However, the Hospice of St. Olga would have been more like the modern conception of the term, rather than a place of shelter for weary travellers to St. Petersburg.

Benois was the founding member of an artistic dynasty. His father, Louis Jules Benois (1770-1882), was a confectioner and arrived in Russia from France in 1794, but Nikolai became an architect rather than following in his father's footsteps. Nikolai immersed his own children in art and among his many talented descendents were famous painters, composers and set designers including Alexandre Benois (1870-1960). There exists a museum in St. Petersburg, held in part of one of Nikolai's buildings, solely dedicated to celebrating the artistic achievements of the extraordinary Benois family.

Benois had studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, producing designs that were influenced both by the tradition of the Renaissance



Nikolai Leontjewitsch Benois, *Hospice de Ste. Olga, St. Petersburg* (Detail)

villa and by Count Aleksandr Stroganov's (1794-1814) neo-Classical *dacha* (1796, by Andrey Voronikhin (1759-1814)). Benois' design for the College of Jurisprudence (1836) was awarded the Academy's Great Gold Medal. This graduation project contained reminiscences of Classicism, as did his project for a museum one year earlier.

Benois began to practise as an assistant to Konstantin Andreyevich Ton (1794-1881), an adherent of the Russo-Byzantine style, working as a draughtsman on the construction of the cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow (1832-1880, destroyed 1930s). In 1840 he visited Germany, where he made drawings of Romanesque buildings in Speyer, Worms and Cologne. In Munich, his most significant influence came from the Staatsbibliothek (1832-1843) by Friedrich von Gärtner (1791-1847). In Italy, together with Aleksandr Krakau (1817-1888) and Aleksandr Rezanov (1817-1887), Benois took the measurements of Orvieto Cathedral (1842-1846), a major undertaking which influenced his later work.

