

# NIKOLAI TARASIEVICH MALYSHEV

(St. Petersburg b.1851)

## *Scenes of Peasant Life*

signed 'N. Malischeff' (lower left)  
ink and gouache on paper  
50 x 36 cm (19¾ x 14 in)

with a watercolour study (*verso*)

**T**HIS WORK DEPICTS A NUMBER OF SCENES SHOWING different aspects of Russian rural life which surround the central portrait of a peasant. This highly individualised portrait reveals a tired-looking figure leaning on a staff. He wears multiple layers of slightly torn and ragged clothing and his feet are thickly bound with cloth. He has a long, weather-beaten face, accentuated by a thick beard, and a skull cap covers his bald head. He seems to stare wearily into space, caught up in his thoughts. Although this is a portrait where the hardships of rural life are evident, there is a sense of dignity about the figure. This sympathetic portrayal is enhanced by Nikolai Tarasievich Malyshev's technique of framing the figure with a white rectangular space, lending the peasant a sense of *gravitas*.

Surrounding this central figure are four additional vignettes of Russian rural life. The bottom half of the work consists of a formal portrait of an extended family standing outside their thatched cottage. The male figures stand to one side; one leans on a hoe whilst another wears the heavy apron of a blacksmith. The five children have been forced to line up formally and they look stiffly self-conscious in contrast to the relaxed demeanour of the adults. The grubby, barefooted state of the children testifies to the family's poverty, but the large, well-maintained house is a tangible symbol of their hard-working lives. On the left-hand side, a solitary farmer strides home, his tools slung over his shoulder; above him Malyshev depicts the village market. The market is thronged with people and takes place outside the walls of a church. On the right-hand side a group of workers make their way along the bank of a wide river. This last depiction is key to the unusual composition as the cloudy sky also impinges on the central portrait, which helps to unify different scenes that might otherwise feel isolated from one another. *Scenes of Peasant Life* shows the variety of a Russian village. Symbols such as the church reinforce the sense of community that pervades the work.

Malyshev's work is characterised by portraits of simple figures going about their daily business. Despite a more traditional composition, *Adjusting her Hookah*, see figure 1, shares a number of characteristics with the present work: A young lady sits cross-legged on the ground with her back against a column as she relaxes with a hookah pipe. Like the central figure in the present work she is lost in thought, paying no attention to the viewer, giving a slightly detached feel to both portraits. The lady has an exotic feel to her, and *Scenes of Peasant Life* also feels like a depiction of one of the more remote

corners of the Russian empire. This interest in foreign and exotic figures recurs throughout Malyshev's work, and reflects his extensive travelling. Both works depict simple genre scenes capturing the lives of ordinary but distinctly individual people, and demonstrate Malyshev's skill in capturing the nuances of expression and action which make for lively and engaging portraits.

Unfortunately very little is known about Malyshev's life. He studied throughout the 1870s at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg where he excelled as a draughtsman, frequently being awarded prizes. In 1881 he travelled to Europe and when he returned gained further accolades for his genre scenes capturing the simple existence of foreign tradesmen. He continued to produce similar work throughout his career and *Scenes of Peasant Life* is testament to his ability to make ordinary subjects lively and vibrant.



Nikolai Tarasievich  
Malyshev,  
*Adjusting her Hookah*,  
Private Collection  
(Figure 1)





H. H. Schupp