

ILYA YEFIMOVICH REPIN

(*Chuguyev, Ukraine 1844 - Kuokalla 1930*)

Study for 'Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan'

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1878' (lower centre), numbered 52 (lower right); further numbered 115 (on the reverse)
pencil and grey wash on paper
23.5 x 33.1 cm (9¼ x 13 in)

Provenance: with The Piccadilly Gallery, London, 1966;
Mrs Sanford Black;
anonymous sale, Christie's, Park Avenue, New York, 23 February 1983, lot 80;
acquired at the above sale by the previous American owner.

THIS REMARKABLE DRAWING IS A PREPARATORY sketch for Ilya Yefimovich Repin's best-known painting, *Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan* (fig. 1). Repin began the painting in the late 1870s but did not finish it until 1891. When completed, it was bought by Tsar Alexander III (1845-1894) for a record price of 35,000 roubles. The painting depicts the Zaporozhian Cossacks composing their legendary reply of 1675 to Sultan Mohammed IV's (1642-1693) request that they surrender. The final work was painted at a time when Turkey was still implacably opposed to Russia, and thus tapped into contemporary public sentiment. Repin sought to recreate the scene with great historical accuracy, and meticulously researched this moment in history with numerous historians, including the renowned expert, Professor Dmytro Yavornytsky (1855-1940).

In the final painting, each of the Cossacks jostles around the central table desperate to contribute their own soubriquet for the Sultan, responding to and mocking his boasts. From the present study one already has a clear sense of how the final painting would shape up, with Repin experimenting with the positioning of a few of the key characters in order to achieve the maximum impact. The viewer can revel in the vigorous, animated interaction of the group, as one of the Cossacks, his head shaven and back bare, adds his own comments, gesticulating with his hand. The group's leader, Ivan Sirko (c.1610-1680), listens intently, whilst puffing from his pipe, as the scribe jots down his every word, a wry smile escaping from his lips. The raucous laughter ripples through the group and is so tangible that it is little surprise to know that Repin had reputedly begun the painting as a study of laughter.

In the present drawing, *Study for 'Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan'*, the bald headed Zaporozhian warrior sits to the left, in a similar pose to that in the final work. It is interesting to note that in the present pencil study, and other oil studies of the final painting¹, he is fully clothed. Repin's decision to depict him bare-backed in the final



Ilya Yefimovich Repin, *Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan*, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Figure 1)

painting was no doubt a way of accentuating his boorishness, and also a way of adding a further dimension to his character, by presenting him as a gambler - without his shirt on he could not hide any cards up his sleeves. This character was modelled on a schoolteacher, Konstantin Belonovskaya, who was a friend of both Repin and Professor Yavornytsky.

The figure with the fringed hairstyle in the present study is turned around to face us in the final painting, and becomes the scribe. The model for this particular Cossack was the aforementioned Professor Yavornytsky himself, the hairstyle giving him a suitably studious air. It is reputed that Professor Yavornytsky was in a very glum mood when he arrived at Repin's studio to pose. In order to coax a wry smile out of him, as seen in the final painting, Repin gave him a magazine with cartoons in it to read during the sitting.

Even in this small study, Repin manages to capture the true independent and powerful spirit of the Cossacks, presenting us with an array of vibrant and varied characters.

¹ Preliminary oil sketches, or other versions, are in held the collections of The National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, and The State Fine Arts Museum, Kharkiv.

