

# VASILII IVANOVICH SURIKOV

(Krasnoyarsk, Siberia 1848 - Moscow 1916)

## *The Storm*

signed in Cyrillic (lower right)  
graphite, pen, ink and wash heightened with white, on paper  
13 x 19.7 cm (5¼ x 7¾ in)

**Provenance:** Property from a former private collection, Washington, D.C.

A MASS OF FIGURES SWARM AROUND AN ISOLATED SPIT of land, desperately trying to clamber up to save themselves, whilst others, their energy sapped, drown in the surrounding murky waters, or are engulfed by the ferocious flames. In the centre of the work, a mother desperately clings to her child, her hair and clothing dramatically buffeted by the strong winds. A tiger and an elephant are also visible, one writhing in the fire of which he almost seems a part, the other sinking to the depths, their exotic presence adding to the nightmarish drama of the scene.

The present work calls to mind the drama of Virgil's description of the shipwreck at the beginning of *The Aeneid*: 'Men shouted, ropes screamed, clouds suddenly blotted out the light of the sky from the eyes of the Trojans and black night brooded on the sea as the heavens thundered and lightning flashed again and again across the sky. Wherever the Trojans looked, death stared them in the face'.<sup>1</sup> A similar evocation of the chaos and calamity of a shipwreck is conveyed by Vasili Ivanovich Surikov in *The Storm*; the man carrying a child on his shoulders is reminiscent of the artistic tradition of depicting Aeneas carrying his own father out of Troy.

The drama of Surikov's *The Storm* calls to mind Théodore Géricault's (1791-1824) *The Raft of Medusa* (fig. 1). *The Raft of Medusa* was acquired by the Louvre soon after Géricault's death, and as such it is quite possible that it was seen by Surikov on his trip to France in the 1880s. As in Géricault's work, Surikov chooses tragedy as his dominant subject matter. The compositional similarities are notable, as is the detail with which both artists expose the viewer to the stark suffering of humankind. Both works also appear to follow in the manner of historical painting, with their dramatic presentation. Surikov



Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of Medusa*, 1818-1819, The Louvre, Paris (Figure 1)



Vasili Ivanovich Surikov, *The Conquest of Siberia by Yermak*, 1895, The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Figure 2)

was adept at depicting the chaos caused by mass humanity, as he often depicted military scenes from Russia's past, such as *The Conquest of Siberia by Yermak* (fig. 2)

Surikov's artistic talent was first spotted by his schoolteacher, N. V. Grebnev, who began to tutor him individually in order to nurture his gift. After finishing school in 1868, Surikov left on a year-long journey on horseback to St. Petersburg, where he eventually joined the Academy of Art in 1869. 1874 marked the date of Surikov's first historical work *The Knyaz's (Grand Duke's) Court of Law*, and soon afterwards, he received a commission for four large paintings for the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Surikov moved to the city in order to complete the works, and settled there permanently. Moscow was to provide considerable inspiration for the artist; Surikov was taken aback by its great history, the views of the Red Square, and the monumental architecture of monasteries and cathedrals, leading him to comment, 'when I moved to Moscow, this centre of the nation, I immediately found my way in art.' Shortly afterwards, Surikov began his monumental work *Morning of Strelets' Execution*, which he finished in 1881. The painting defined the main direction his *oeuvre* was to follow - the depiction of Russians at a turning point in their history. His next large-scale painting, *Menshikov in Berezovo*, dealt with the drama of Menshikov's exile, and connected with the viewer on a highly personal level. Both of these large-scale canvases were subsequently purchased by the Russian collector Pavel Tretyakov (1832-1898), in whose gallery they still remain today. The sale of the two paintings allowed Surikov to travel abroad, where he visited Germany, Italy, France and Austria, studying and admiring their art and different schools and styles of painting. The influence of this trip can be seen in much of his work, including *The Storm*.

We would like to thank Dr. Grigory Goldovsky for confirming the authenticity of this work from a photograph.

<sup>1</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book I.87-90, trans. David West.



(Actual Size)