

ALEXEI ALEKSEEVICH HARLAMOFF

(Saratov 1840 - Paris 1925)

An African Girl

signed and dated 'A. Harlamoff, 1909.' (lower right)
oil on canvas
66.5 x 52.5 cm (26¼ x 20¾ in)

AN AFRICAN GIRL IS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE OF ALEXEI Alekseevich Harlamoff's most arresting portraits. The sitter, stares out of the canvas, distant, pensive and yet relaxed. The shawl that rests gently on her shoulders, and the plain head-dress covering her hair, do not possess the excessive grandeur normally associated with exotic fabric. Instead, Harlamoff's rendering of the subject is subtle and simple. On immediate inspection, one can see the influence of Rembrandt. Harlamoff learned his skills by copying Old Master paintings, such as Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, (c.1632). Referring back to this informal portrait of an African girl, Harlamoff demonstrates a greater allegiance to the European Old Masters, such as Rembrandt and to an extent Joshua Reynolds than to his predecessor Alexander Brulloff (1798-1877). Brulloff's almost saccharine renditions of his sitters, which predominantly belonged to the upper classes, left no trace of an influence on Harlamoff.

In terms of the composition and style, once again Rembrandt's and Reynolds' portraits spring to mind. The girl's rounded and protruding lips are rendered in a naturalistic style, her oval face and white smock made palpable through the heavily textured paint. The painting appears sketchy due to the unfinished background and simple patterning of her shawl, which at the same time complements her beauty. Shades of green and yellow pervade the background and are also echoed in the linear pattern on her shawl. Harlamoff's career evolved to see him become a respected portrait painter of important sitters such as Tsar Alexander II and Prince Demodoff-San Donato, *An African Girl* is thus an interesting deviation from such grand subjects.

In addition to the aesthetic aspect of *An African Girl*, one also has to question why Harlamoff chose to paint this subject in 1909. One possibility is a renewal in the interest in slavery and the slave trade. A parallel has often

been noted between the legislative emancipation of the serfs in Russia in 1861 and the official freedom of slaves after 1863 in America. Indeed, the subject was a focal point of political and social discussion throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, Harlamoff's fame was not confined to Europe.

Another influence on the subject matter may also have been the increased appetite in the mid to late nineteenth century for Eastern furniture, decorative arts, textiles and Orientalist art. The arrival of steam in the nineteenth century made travel to parts of the Middle East and North Africa much more accessible and many artists journeyed to the East, where they predominately produced genre scenes based on their experiences of everyday life. This interest filtered through to Russian artists, such as Harlamoff's contemporaries Richard Karlovich Zommer (see cat. no.s 43 - 51), and Sergei Ivanovich Svetoslavsky (see cat no. 7), whose respective *oeuvres* heavily feature Eastern subject matters.

Harlamoff was born close to Saratov on the Volga River. He enrolled at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg at the age of fourteen. There he won a gold medal for his painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The prestigious prize enabled Harlamoff to travel to and study in Paris at the École des Beaux Arts under Leon Bonnat, whose works can be found in the State Hermitage Museum. While in Paris, Harlamoff's talent soon became clear and Émile Zola rated his portrait of Ivan Turgenev as amongst the best works of the Paris Salon of 1876. Harlamoff regularly exhibited at the Salon and won a second class medal in the 1878 Paris Universal Exhibition. His career steadily progressed from painting military scenes and religious subjects in his early years to becoming a celebrated portrait painter of prominent figures such as Tsar Alexander II and Turgenev. Harlamoff is, however, best known for his informal portraits of girls whom he painted for their beauty and innocence.



A. H. Lamoy
1909.