



Isaak Levitan: Lyrical Landscapes

Averil King

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This is the first western study of the renowned Russian nineteenth-century landscape painter, Isaak Levitan (1860-1900).

Published to coincide with the recent opening of the 'Russian Landscape Painting' exhibition in Groningen, Netherlands.

Born into a poor Jewish family in Lithuania, Levitan was able to enrol at the Moscow School of Painting when aged only thirteen and made rapid progress, the great merchant collector, Pavel Tretyakov buying one of his early paintings. In 1876 he sketched in the Crimea and during the summers of 1887 and 1890 he painted in the Volga region. These years saw the development of his long friendship with the future playwright Anton Chekhov and the creation of his first 'mood landscapes'.

Levitan travelled extensively, if briefly, in Europe, visiting Berlin, Paris, north Italy, Switzerland, Munich and Vienna and was thus, unlike most of his Russian contemporaries, well aware of the artistic trends in the west. His experience of European painting added considerably to the breadth of his vision in depicting the Russian terrain. In doing this Levitan sought simple but well-loved motifs of the countryside, portraying them in an increasingly laconic and intelligent way. Levitan's scenes of fields and forests at twilight achieve an extraordinary atmospheric veracity, while his joyful evocations of the Russian spring are noted for their expressive lyricism. His work was greatly admired by Diaghilev, the legendary theatre manager Stanislavsky, and the world-famous opera singer Chaliapin.

Towards the end of his short life Levitan exhibited regularly with the Itinerants (the Russian association for travelling exhibitions) and with the Munich Secession and was responsible for revitalising the teaching of landscape painting in Moscow.

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