

Press Release

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CHRISTIE'S

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VASILY VERESHCHAGIN'S MASTERPIECE

CRUCIFIXION BY THE ROMANS

TO APPEAR AT AUCTION FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 100 YEARS



London – This autumn's Russian Art Sale in London will feature Vasily Vereshchagin's awe-inspiring *Crucifixion by the Romans*, painted in 1887 in Paris. It will be offered on 28th November with an estimate of £1,000,000-1,500,000. The picture will be sold to benefit the acquisitions fund of the Brooklyn Museum, where it was exhibited for the last time in 1932.

“After conducting a careful review of the Museum's late-19th and 20th-century Russian holdings, we came to the conclusion that *Crucifixion by the Romans* by Vasily Vereshchagin does not represent the focus of the collection, which is on modern and avant-garde Russian art. The painting deserves to be better utilized than it has been at Brooklyn, where it was last on view in 1932. We did not foresee a time when it would be exhibited here again,” commented the Brooklyn Museum.

Sarah Mansfield, Head of Christie's Russian Art Department says: "To offer such an incredible work is an exciting moment for any specialist. We would like to thank the Brooklyn Museum for their cooperation and we are looking forward to presenting *Crucifixion by the Romans* to an international audience, for the first time in 80 years, on 28th November."

On 14th October 1888, the *New York Times* announced the arrival of a large number of Vereshchagin's paintings in the United States. The works in question, including *Crucifixion by the Romans* had been sent to New York to be exhibited by the American Art Association and to tour the United States before returning to New York to be auctioned. The exhibition travelled to Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston and was a tremendous success, attended by literally hundreds of thousands of people. The auction commenced sharp at 8.00pm on 17th November 1891. The *New York Times* reported the following day, 'The highest price of the evening was achieved by the large painting, one of a series of three that were sold separately, called *Crucifixion by the Romans*.' As the final painting in the series referred to by Vereshchagin as 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', which was devoted to the subject of capital punishment, *Crucifixion by the Romans* is epic in both scale and content. . By 1899 the work was on view at the Brooklyn Museum, lent by Mr John W. Brown and was presented officially to the museum in 1906 by Mrs Lilla Brown, in memory of her husband.

Of monumental size, this work was painted in Paris in Vereshchagin's studio which was particularly designed for the execution of over-sized canvasses. The composition is undoubtedly striking: in direct contrast to traditional depictions of the Crucifixion, Vereshchagin positions Christ, illuminated, on the extreme right of the painting, placing the primary emphasis of the composition on the crowd. The viewer becomes part of the crowd, peering over people and horses to view the spectacle. A large expanse of dark sky stretches across the horizontal, the city wall looms heavy over a crowd of traders, Pharisees and a mournful group of Christ's supporters. In the foreground, Roman soldiers with their spears and lances stand guard. In any study of Vereshchagin's work written before or after the Russian Revolution, this trilogy of paintings stands as one of the major undertakings of his career. First conceived in 1876, its completion was a dream of the artist's for over a decade, until the final canvas, the present work, was finished in 1887.

The theme that connects the three works – extremes of capital punishment under three of the greatest territorial empires the world has ever known, the Roman, the British and Vereshchagin's own, the Russian – is emphasized by the works' titles: *Blowing from Guns in British India* and *Hanging in Russia*. Each work symbolically illustrates the moment of the greatest ethical test each empire had faced, lamenting the brutality of the state while poignantly depicting the unchanging humanity that connects people and populations across vast expanses of time and geographical territory.

In answer to the British and Russian criticism the artist faced for his trilogy – Vereshchagin responded, 'A hundred years hence they will be appreciated: the pictures will live'. Over a century later, Vereshchagin's prophesy has been realised, with the appearance of Vereshchagin's phenomenal masterwork, *Crucifixion by the Romans*, at auction.

Sale: Christie's London, 28 November 2011 at 10 am
Viewing: 25, 26, 27 November 2011

About Christie's

Christie's, the world's leading art business had global auction and private sales in the first half of 2011 that totaled £2.0 billion/\$3.2 billion. In 2010 it achieved global auction and private sales of £3.3 billion/\$5.0 billion. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's conducted the greatest auctions of the 18th,

19th and 20th centuries, and today remains a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers over 450 sales annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$100 million. Christie's has 53 offices in 32 countries and 10 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Zurich, Dubai and Hong Kong. More recently, Christie's has led the market with expanded initiatives in emerging and new markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai.

*Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and do not reflect costs, financing fees or application of buyer's or seller's credits.