

For Immediate Release

March 1, 2007

Contact: Kate Swan (New York) +1 212 636 2680 kswan@christies.com
Clare Roberts (London) + 44 207 389 2855 croberts@christies.com

VERESHCHAGIN'S ICONIC SOLOMON'S WALL TO LEAD CHRISTIE'S RUSSIAN SALES

Russian Paintings & Works of Art
April 18, 2007

“Some spread the idea of peace by means of fascinating and powerful words; others present in its defense religious, economic and other arguments; and I advocate the same by means of color.”
-Vasilii Vereshchagin

New York/London – Vasilii Vereshchagin's *Solomon's Wall* will lead Christie's spring sale of *Russian Paintings & Works of Art* in New York on April 18. A magnificent and historically significant painting by the artist, this work is being offered by the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA), and is estimated at \$3-5 million. Very few of Vereshchagin's works have appeared on the market in the U.S in the last half-century, and most of his works are currently housed in Russian museums, making this is a rare opportunity for collectors around the world.

Solomon's Wall will be exhibited for the first time ever in Russia March 5-16 at The State Tretyakov Gallery, where it will be on view in the museum's *Vereshchagin Hall*, along side other works by this great Russian 19th century artist. This project launches a new collaboration between the State Tretyakov Gallery and Christie's, which is aimed at exhibiting in Russia great masterpieces appearing in the international market and making them accessible to the general Russian public.

“We are delighted to host the famous painting by Vasilii Vasilievich Vereshchagin ‘Solomon's Wall’ which, for the first time since its creation in 1884-1885, is coming to Russia. For nearly two weeks ‘Solomon's Wall’ will be exhibited in the Vereshchagin Hall among other masterpieces from our permanent display, next to the Study specially created by the artist for it from our museum collection, said Valentin Rodionov, Director of the State Tretyakov Gallery.

“The State Tretyakov Gallery is rightfully proud of its world's largest collection of works by this great Russian artist, whose work was so highly praised by Pavel Tretyakov himself. Tretyakov personally acquired a considerable part of his artistic legacy thus having salvaged it for the next generations,” he continued. “ We welcome our new joint project with Christie's which will make it possible for a wide range of art lovers and Russian collectors to view masterpieces created by Russian artists. Works, which at destiny's hand, happened to end up in different corners of the world and are only just resurfacing in the world art market.”

Jussi Pylkkänen, President of Christie's Europe said, *“It is a great honor for us to exhibit ‘Solomon’s Wall’ by Vasilii Vereshchagin at the State Tretyakov Gallery - treasury of Russian Art and one of the leading museums of the world. In every country its national culture is being largely defined by the relationships between the public museums and private collections. The world over they coexist closely, supporting each other – and that is what keeps them alive and allows them to develop. It was the concept of wide accessibility of works of art which served as the foundation upon which the great collector and philanthropist Pavel Tretyakov built this magnificent museum. We are very happy to launch our cooperation with the State Tretyakov Gallery and in the future intend to bring and exhibit in Russia works of art of top museum quality.”*

Vasilii Vereshchagin: Master of the Historical Genre

In the second half of the 19th century Vasilii Vereshchagin was a major figure in the artistic life of Russia and the most well-known Russian artist in the West. Exhibitions of his paintings showing powerful, compelling and often unforgettable images were seen as major cultural events in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Paris, London, Berlin, New York, and many other major cities where they attracted thousands of visitors.

In addition to being an accomplished battle painter who documented the brutal nature of modern warfare and the devastating results of many military conflicts, Vereshchagin was arguably the most well-known Russian Orientalist. An historian, ethnographer, journalist, geographer and indefatigable traveler, Vereshchagin spent time in Central Asia, the Himalayas, India, Tibet, the Middle East, the Philippines, and Japan and aimed to document the places, people, clothing, and customs of the indigenous people with utmost accuracy and truthfulness at the time when ethnographic studies and systematic documentation of the native cultures were only beginning.

Solomon’s Wall: A Magnificent Work from the Palestinian Series

By the 1880’s, Vasilii Vereshchagin’s reputation as a master of the historical genre and Russia’s greatest battle painter was well established. Though he was embraced by the liberal art critics as an utter realist in art and idolized by the general public, Vereshchagin faced criticism and opposition from the Russian authority for his allegedly biased portrayals of wars and unnecessary brutal accuracy of depiction. Vicious attacks unleashed by the reactionary press led the artist to begin contemplating a new project, one that would take him far away from the stifling atmosphere of the political reaction that seized Russia after the tragic assassination of Emperor Alexander II in 1881 and would give him an opportunity to travel to another exotic and mysterious land – Palestine.

Upon arrival in Palestine in 1883, Vereshchagin was captivated by the solemn beauty of the Holy Land, and was inspired by its historic monuments and sites seen as sacred by the Christians, the Jews, and the Muslims. Inspired by the important cultural monuments in the region, Vereshchagin painted many sites significant to the Jewish as well as Christian traditions. Among

his subjects were the Tomb of Abraham, the Valley of Ezdraelon, the Tombs of the Kings, the remains of the ancient town of Bethsaida, and old Jewish Tombs near Jerusalem. What was planned to be a short study trip for one painting became a two years adventure, which resulted in a collection of works known as the *Palestinian Series*, of which the current work is one of the finest examples.

Solomon's Wall or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, one of the Jews' holiest places for prayer and assembly, left an unforgettable impression on the artist. Rather than romanticizing the subject, Vereshchagin shows a sun-drenched, weathered stone wall towering over the large crowd of weary pilgrims who sit, stand or kneel in front of the sacred remnants of the ancient Temple. Hundreds of worshippers of all ages and types crowd the space hoping to gain a solemn private moment at the Wailing Wall, but instead, find themselves queuing in the long line of pious believers. Vereshchagin presents not a Biblical drama, but a common scene, almost journalistic in its natural authenticity. It is not the enormity of the wall that captures the imagination; it is the parade of characters in the unfolding human drama.

The *Palestinian Series*, completed in Paris during 1884-1885, included a cycle of paintings depicting the life of Jesus from rather unorthodox point of view and presented the Holy Family in a prosaic setting stripped of the usual glorifying undertones. These quickly caused significant controversy and caused the series to disappear from public view shortly after its European and American debuts. In fact, the paintings were banned from being shown or reproduced in Russia at the time.

Vereshchagin's U.S. Exhibition, 1888-1891

In light of the controversy surrounding him in Europe, Vereshchagin with great relief accepted an invitation to tour the United States with a large exhibition showcasing his latest works. In November 1888, after an aggressive promotional campaign organized by the American Art Association the Vereshchagin's exhibition opened in the American Art Galleries in New York. Over the two months it was opened, the show was a phenomenal success.

When the tour ended in 1891, the works returned to New York City, where the entire collection of 110 paintings was auctioned off. Only a few paintings were acquired by public institutions; most of the works were purchased by private American collectors. Eventually a few sketches and paintings ended up in the Russian collections, in general, however, because the series was never exhibited in Russia and received very little press coverage there, the Palestinian series remained virtually unknown to Russian art collectors with several major paintings believed to be lost.

Up until this day, the painting was part of the collection of the Berkeley Art Museum in California. It was donated to the university in 1920 by Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842-1919), who acquired the painting at the 1891 auction in New York.

