LOT 6
IVAN KONSTANTINOVICH AIVAZOVSKY
1817-1900
PUSHKIN AND COUNTESS RAEVSKAYA BY THE SEA NEAR GURZUF AND PARTENIT
signed in Cyrillic and dated 1886 l.r.
oil on canvas
80 by 104cm., 31 1/2 by 41in.
ESTIMATE: £1,200,000-1,800,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 1,833,250 GBP

PROVENANCE
Sotheby's London, Icons, Russian Pictures, Works of Art and Fabergé, 20 February 1985, lot 226
Trammell Crow Collection, Dallas

LITERATURE
N. Sobko, Slovar' russkikh khudozhnikov, vayatelei, zhivopistsev, zodchikh risovalschikov, graverov, litografov, p.340, No.627

CATALOGUE NOTE
Alexander Pushkin and Ivan Aivazovsky met in September 1836 at the autumn exhibition of the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg, where praise from the famous poet left a lasting impression on the nineteen year-old artist: "From that moment on my favourite poet became the object of my thoughts and source of inspiration". Only a few months later Pushkin was tragically killed in a duel. His death stunned the country; beatified by Russian artists, composers and writers for decades to come, Pushkin's iconic status was comparable to Byron's and became deeply embedded in the national psyche.

In the 1880's, Aivazovsky chose to pay his tribute to Pushkin by devoting an entire cycle of pictures which depict the poet during his period of exile in the Crimea (fig.1). In the offered work the scale of the figures in the foreground accentuates the grandiose landscape behind, yet this is painted with characteristic subtlety such that it complements rather than diminishes the stature of the poet; the sun does not sear down on its victims as it does in other paintings but delicately illuminates the romantic scene below. The lady in question is one of the four daughters of General Nikolai Raevsky, with whom Pushkin stayed with in Gurzuf for three weeks in the summer of 1820 during which he wrote some of his most famous romantic poems including The Fountain of Bakhchiserai (fig.2).

Exactly which daughter captured the poet's heart and became his muse is disputed, though there is evidence to suggest that it may have been Maria who would later marry the prominent Decembrist Prince Sergei Volkonsky and follow him into exile to Siberia. Pushkin's infatuation for her is implied in the dedication of the poem Poltava, and is supported by an episode from Maria's memoirs which recalls a family journey to the mineral springs of the Caucasus not far from Taganrog, when the party first caught sight of the sea from their carriage and rushed down to look at the waves: "Unaware that we were travelling with a poet, I began to chase after the waves for fun and then run back before they could catch me. Pushkin thought it such a pretty scene that he praised my childish pranks in a poem; I was only fifteen"

This delightful vignette was later incorporated into what is arguably Pushkin's greatest poem, Eugene Onegin:

On the seashore, with storm impending,
how envious was I of the waves
each in tumultuous turn descending
to lie down at her feet like slaves! I
longed, like every breaker hissing,
to smother her dear feet with kissing.

No, never in the hottest fire
of boiling youth did I desire
with any torture so exquisite
to kiss Armida's lips, or seek
the flaming roses of a cheek,
or languid bosoms; and no visit
of raging passion's surge and roll
ever so roughly rocked my soul!

(Eugene Onegin, 1825-1832, XXXIII)