

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Sir John Crampton (Dublin 1805 - Bray 1886)

Two Cossacks on Guard & Study of a Log Sleigh

one inscribed 'St. Petersburg, Feb, 1830' (upper right)

watercolour with pencil on paper

12.5 x 9.5 cm (5 x 3¾ in); 8.5 x 15 cm (3⅜ x 5⅞ in) (2)

Two bearded Cossack soldiers lean against a wall on a cobbled street. With their arms hanging limply by their sides they gaze blankly into the street. They are dressed in thick blue coats, tall hats and gloves to protect them from the harsh weather conditions of their region. The watercolour is fairly simple in terms of detail and colour usage, but *Two Cossacks on Guard* is filled with atmosphere and sentimentality. The *Study of a Log Sleigh* depicts a horse harnessed to a sleigh and a man attending to the loading of logs. The man is dressed in the same type of coat as the Cossack guards, only his hat looks slightly different. Both of these watercolours convey a strong sense that they were painted directly from life.

Cossacks originally formed military communities in the Ukraine and southern Russia. These administrative subdivisions were called a Cossack 'host' or *voisko* in Imperial Russia. A Cossack host consisted of a certain area with Cossack settlements and was usually named after the regions of their dislocation. The Cossacks always had an independent lifestyle, but the expansionist ambitions of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century threatened this. By the end of the eighteenth century, Cossacks were transformed into a special social elite. They became border guards on national and internal ethnic borders and regularly provided soldiers to fight in numerous conflicts throughout the Empire. In return for these services the government endowed them with vast social autonomy.

Each host had their own leadership, regalia, uniforms and ranks. The uniforms of different hosts had distinctive colourings. The basic uniforms usually had loose fitting tunics and wide trousers. However, the Caucasian hosts wore *cherkesska* coats with ornamental cartridge loops and coloured *beshmets* (waistcoats): these typify the popular image of the Cossacks. The Caucasian hosts usually wore high fleece caps. Other hosts wore these only in full dress and wore peaked caps for ordinary duties. The Cossacks in the watercolours wear traditional long coats with a sash and belt over their uniforms. The coats are blue, which might mean that the uniforms are blue as well. Astrakhan Cossacks, Don Cossacks and Ural Cossacks wore blue uniforms, possibly Sir John Crampton depicted men from one of these hosts.

Crampton was a British diplomat, who was transferred to St. Petersburg on 20th September 1828 as an unpaid attaché. He became a paid attaché at Brussels and Vienna. Crampton was promoted to Secretary of the Legation at Bern in 1844 and was subsequently transferred to Washington D.C. in the same position, where he sparked a diplomatic row and returned to Britain. Crampton was appointed minister-plenipotentiary at Hanover in 1857 and became ambassador at St. Petersburg on 31st March 1858, where he stayed for two years. The artist married Victoire (1837-1871), a singer and the daughter of Michael William Balfe (1808-1870), the composer. The marriage was brief, for Victoire divorced him after three years. Crampton died at the age of eighty-one, at his seat Bushy Park, near Bray, County Wicklow.

Based on the date and inscription on one of the watercolours, it seems safe to say that Crampton painted these during his first period in St. Petersburg, thus reinforcing the idea that they were painted from life.

Artist description:

Sir John Crampton was a British diplomat. He was the eldest son of Sir Philip Crampton, 1st Baronet (1777–1858), Surgeon General to the Forces. After being educated at Eton College and Trinity College, Dublin, he entered the diplomatic service as an unpaid attaché at Turin on 7 September 1826, and was transferred to Saint Petersburg on 30 September 1828. He became a paid attaché at Brussels on 16 November 1834, and at Vienna on 9 May 1839, and was promoted to be secretary of legation at Bern on 13 December 1844. He was then transferred, in the same capacity, on 3 July 1845, to Washington, D.C., where his most important diplomatic services were rendered. He served at first under Sir Richard Pakenham, and then under Sir Henry Bulwer, successive ministers plenipotentiary. He acted as chargé d'affaires from May 1847 to December 1849, and again from August 1850 until January 1852, when Bulwer left America after concluding the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, when he was himself appointed minister-plenipotentiary and envoy-extraordinary to the United States.

Crampton soon quarrelled with the Americans. During the Crimean War, he actively recruited troops within the territories of the USA. By 1856, Lord Clarendon, the British Foreign Secretary, had made an apology, the Americans making Crampton's recall, with three British consuls, the price of concord. On 28 May 1856, President Pierce broke off relations with Crampton, who at once returned to Britain. Palmerston reinforced the North American squadron. Some expected war, but Palmerston accepted Crampton's recall. He rewarded him with a knighthood on 20 September 1856. On 2 March 1857, Crampton was appointed minister-plenipotentiary at Hanover, and ambassador at St Petersburg on 31 March 1858.

On 10 June 1858, Crampton succeeded his father as second baronet and on 31 March 1860, he married Victoire (1837–1871), the singer, daughter of Michael William Balfe, the composer. She divorced him on the grounds of impotence in 1863. His last posting was on 11 December 1860, as minister-plenipotentiary and envoy-extraordinary at Madrid. He remained there until 1 July 1869, when he retired on a pension, after more than forty years' diplomatic service. He died, at the age of eighty-one, at his seat, Bushy Park, near Bray, County Wicklow, on 5 December 1886. As he had no children, the baronetcy became extinct.