

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



Henryk Siemiradzki (Pechenegi, Ukraine 1843 - Krakow, Poland 1902)

The Rape of the Sabine Women

signed in Cyrillic (lower right) and dated '27 August 1867' (lower right)
pen and ink heightened with bodycolour over pencil on paper
54 x 76 cm (21½ x 30 in)

In this drawing Henryk Siemiradzki has presented an intense and dramatic interpretation of the story of The Rape of the Sabine Women. The Rape (in this context, rape means abduction) is supposed to have occurred in the early history of Rome, not long after its foundation by Romulus. Romulus and his troops sought to find wives in order to start new families and ensure the future growth of the population. They looked to the Sabines or *Sabini*, an Italic tribe who lived in the central Apennine region of ancient Italy, but negotiations proved futile as the Sabines feared the emergence of a rival society and so refused to allow their women to marry the Romans. Consequently Romulus and his followers planned to abduct the Sabine women. He arranged a magnificent festival to which he invited the inhabitants of neighbouring settlements, including the Sabines, with their wives and children. During the festivities, at a given signal, the young men of Rome broke into the crowd and, choosing only the unmarried maidens of the Sabines, carried them off. According to Plutarch (c.46-120AD) 'they did not commit this rape wantonly, but with a design purely of forming alliance with their neighbours by the greatest and surest bond.'¹

In *The Rape of the Sabine Women* Siemiradzki has chosen to depict the frenzy of the abduction. The emotions of the various figures are plain to see; the determination of the Romans, the desperate defiance of the Sabine men, and the helpless anguish of the women. Every figure has been closely studied and individualised, so that the viewer becomes engrossed by the individual conflicts within the larger melee. Standing in the background Romulus can be seen, sword brandished as he directs his men.

Siemiradzki was a painter of grandiose history pictures, usually depicting ancient Roman, Russian and biblical subjects. Although *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is an early work, it is comparable to the large-scale oil paintings which brought him such success. For example in [*Svyatoslav's Warriors in the Battle of Silistria*](#), Siemiradzki has again captured the frenzy and struggle of battle, as women and children fight with the soldiers. Both works demonstrate the traditional Classicism which Siemiradzki practised throughout his career. Amidst the tumult each figure has been carefully and individually

depicted, the narrative theatrically and clearly conveyed, and the composition tightly planned and balanced across the foreground.

Siemiradzki was born into a Polish family and originally studied as a scientist, although he had a longstanding interest in painting. He eventually abandoned his scientific career and moved to St. Petersburg to study painting at the Imperial Academy of Arts between the years 1864 and 1870; he adhered to his training as a Classical History painter throughout his career. Upon graduating, he was awarded a scholarship which enabled him to travel and study throughout Europe for six years.

In 1873 he received the title of Academician of the Imperial Academy of Arts for his painting *Christ and a Sinner* based on a verse by Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy (1817-1875) and he established his reputation as a History painter of monumental scale, although he also depicted smaller genre scenes set in Italianate landscapes with antiquated ruins. Siemiradzki also worked on frescoes for the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is a fascinating early work which demonstrates why he was to enjoy such success later in life.

¹ Plutarch, *Lives* II, 14 and 19.

Artist description:

Siemiradzki was born to a Polish szlachta family of a military physician in the village of Novobelgorod (now Pechenegi) near Kharkov, Ukraine. He studied at Kharkov Gymnasium where he learned painting under a scion of Karl Briullov and D. I. Besperchy. He entered the Physics-Mathematics School of Kharkov University but continued his painting lessons from Besperchy.

After graduating from the University with the degree of Kandidat he abandoned his scientific career and moved to Saint Petersburg to study painting at the Imperial Academy of Arts in the years 1864-1870. Upon his graduation he was awarded a gold medal. In 1870-1871 he studied under Karl von Piloty in Munich on a grant from the Academy. In 1871 he moved to Rome, while spending summers at his estate in Strzalkowo, near Czestochowa in Poland.

In 1873 he received the title of an Academician of the Imperial Academy of Arts for his painting *Christ and a Sinner* on a verse by Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy. In 1876-1879 Siemiradzki worked on frescoes for the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (Moscow). In 1879 he offered one of his best-known works, the enormous *Pochodnie Nerona (Nero's torches)*, painted 1876, to the fledgeling Polish National Museum in Kraków. In 1893 he worked on two large paintings for the State Historical Museum (Moscow).

He died in Strzalkowo in 1902. Originally he was buried in Warsaw but later his remains were moved to the national Pantheone on Skalka in Kraków.