

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



**Richard Karlovich Zommer (Munich 1866 - Russia 1939)**

## **Sohbet**

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1910' (lower right) oil on canvas 49 x 75 cm (19¼ x 29½ in)

In this work Richard Karlovich Zommer has depicted a central aspect of oriental life, as figures gather together in the local coffeehouse to escape the heat of the day. As the men congregate in groups of two and three, it is clear that the establishment is a central meeting point in the community, where people come to relax, chat and debate. The figures are all dressed in bright, vibrant colours, enhanced by the glare of the fierce sun. The coffeehouse's patrons shelter under the canopy or the shade of the tree, whilst they drink, eat and smoke shisha from their hookah pipes. Zommer has used a frieze-like composition, with the figures dispersed across the width of the foreground, which focuses the viewers' attention on the individualism of the characters. By capturing the intense heat and the relaxed convivial atmosphere of the scene, Zommer's lifelong fascination with the culture and customs of the orient is clearly demonstrated in *Sohbet*

Whether coffee or teahouses, cafe culture was a central part of life in the oriental countries, where Zommer spent so much of his life travelling and working. These establishments were a key meeting point for people, a hub for a community's social life. For Zommer, who was fascinated by all aspects of oriental life, they were naturally a recurring theme in his work, another example being *Street Cafe, Samarkand*. (Private Collection) Although compositionally different, the works both provide a snapshot of daily life, capturing the unfamiliar and curious aspects of the cafe, the oppressive heat, from which the patrons escape, and an atmosphere of quiet, relaxed conversation.

Zommer was born Munich, but at the age of eighteen moved to St. Petersburg, where he studied with great success at the Academy of Fine Arts. In the 1890's he worked as an ethnologist on an archaeological expedition to Asia, a trip that was to have a profound influence on his painting. His interest in ethnology is clearly evidenced in *Sohbet*, which focuses on the habits and customs of his subjects. This formative trip also sparked perhaps his most prolific period as an artist, during which he worked in a number of genres.

After the turn of the century Zommer moved to Georgia, from where he travelled extensively, walking the Caucasus Mountains in almost their entirety. He recorded scenes from his travels, works which are notable for their simplicity of composition, boldness of colour, and grasp of character. Zommer also

became the first teacher of the great Georgian painter Lado Gudiashvili (1896-1980), who always acknowledged Zommer's formative influence, and the two artists exhibited together in 1926. Details of Zommer's later years are sadly lacking, although he was forced to leave Georgia in 1939 due to the oppressive Stalinist regime, and relocated, along with all ethnic Germans, to Siberia and Kazakhstan during World War II.

### **Artist description:**

The artist and graphic designer Richard Karlovich Zommer was born in Munich in 1866. From 1884 he studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts and had considerable success, receiving several awards for his work. Zommer's most prolific period relates to the last decade of the nineteenth century, which he spent in Asia, where he was sent in an archaeological expedition and worked as an ethnologist. During this period he produced a series of portraits, landscapes and works on paper, twenty of which can be found in the Museum of Uzbekistan.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Zommer went to Georgia, where he led an active life, travelling extensively. He walked almost the entirety of the Caucasus Mountains and produced a number of works during this period that provide a fascinating insight into the Caucasus from an ethnographic point of view, as well as glimpses of everyday occurrences and situations. His charming works characteristically display his love for truth and simplicity, and are executed using deep strong colours. Each of his works is particular in its composition, and each tells a story.

Many Georgian artists in the course of the twentieth century were forced to take on governmental jobs, however Zommer succeeded as a preserver of Georgian arts. Describing the world as it truly was, he was a guardian of truth and key in the creative development of Georgian painter Lado Gudiashvili.

Zommer was Gudiashvili's first teacher and it was Zommer who encouraged the young talented artist to enrol at the Academy of arts in Tbilisi. The academy had a series of distinguished teachers including the Italian painter Longo, the German painter [Oskar Schmerling](#), and the Georgian painter Jakob Nikolades, student of the French sculpture August Rodin. Gudiashvili thought fondly of Zommer, recalling that he was a very articulate, jovial man with red hair, who was popular with everybody and always wore a red scarf around his neck: 'I saw him as someone who stepped out of a Rembrandt painting'.

Zommer had predicted a great career for Gudiashvili, and in December 1926, the two exhibited together at an exhibition in Tbilisi. Gudiashvili was by now well known and had his own distinct style. However, one wonders whether Gudiashvili's passion for Georgia and its landscape was perhaps instilled by Zommer's own particular and relentless obsession with the diversity of the surrounding landscape.

Zommer was a member of many art groups, and exhibited at various exhibitions in St. Petersburg between 1916 and 1920. He was one of the founders of the Society for Encouraging the Caucasian Decorative Arts in Tbilisi, and took part in various exhibitions organised by the Caucasian painters society, between 1916 and 1920 in Tbilissi, in Baku in 1907 and in Taschkent in 1915.

For one of Zommer's exhibitions, the Georgian journalist Michael Dschawachisschwili wrote a review in the newspaper *Znobis Purzeli*. Dschawachisschwili praised Zommer as a great artist, able to express a form of realism in an outstanding way. He commented: 'There is liveliness and holiness reflected in his landscapes, portraits and in his representations of historical monuments.'

During the 1930s, Georgian intellectuals and artists suffered under the Stalinist regime, and in 1939 Zommer was forced to leave Georgia. After this period his exact whereabouts are unknown, this can in part be explained by the fact that all ethnic Germans were relocated to Siberia and Kazakhstan before World War II.

What is clear is that Zommer had a remarkable and dynamic life. Always on the move, he explored man and his character, creating pictures in his individual and unique way, and provided an important role in the history of twentieth century Georgian painting.

### **Collections**

Zommer is represented in the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, amongst other collections.