SPHINX FINE ART



Stephanie von Strechine (Odessa 1858 - Bad Töls 1940)

A Horseman on the Banks of the Dnestr River, Ukraine

signed and dated ‘S. v. Strechine. 1883’ (lower left)
oil on canvas
60.4 x 100.5 cm (23¾ x 39⅝ in)

The present example shows the banks of Dnestr (or Dniester) River at sunset. Stephanie von Strechine deftly creates the winter sunset by silhouetting the trees, empty of their leaves, against the soft colouring of the gradually darkening sky. The total emptiness of the river is only interrupted by a single boat in the background, and the outline of a man watching it from the banks of the river.

The central figure in the composition is a lone man leading his heavily laden horse whilst smoking an elongated pipe. He is depicted in clothing typical of nineteenth-century Ukraine, and the distinctive red cloak possibly suggests he is from the Hutsul region in the Carpathian mountains, from which the Dnestr flows into the Black Sea. His shirt worn open and embroidered at the front, sharovary trousers made of matt woollen fabric, a wide sash across his waist tied at the side, a Persian lamb-skin hat and dark leather boots, all add to his identification.

The Hutsuls were an ethnographic group of Ukrainian pastoral highlanders, believed to be descendants of the Slavic tribe of the Ulychians who resettled in the Carpathian Mountains. Their population grew particularly as a direct result of peasants fleeing to the mountains to escape serfdom, and by the mid-nineteenth century there were over one hundred Hutsul villages and ten noble-owned towns in the region. This painting is therefore particularly poignant as its date of 1883 follows a generation on from the official liberation of serfs in 1861, hence the Hutsul man is depicted being able to peacefully enjoy the view of the Dnestr, a serenity that is mirrored in the landscape.

A lithograph from 1872 shows a mounted Hutsul man and female companion travelling the countryside, indicating the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the group; their name possibly derived from the Slavic word kochul or ‘wanderer’. In both *A Horseman on the Banks of the Dnestr River, Ukraine* and the lithograph the Hutsul man is accompanied by a pony or horse. The Hucul, or Carpathian, pony is a small, heavy breed of horse renowned for possessing great endurance and hardiness in inaccessible areas, they were utilised by the Austro-Hungarian Army in the nineteenth century. The breed is much older than the Hutsul people, and it is possible that they are depicted on the monuments erected by Roman Emperors Domitian and Trajan, as Dacian draft horses.

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Artist description:

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