SPHINX FINE ART



Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky (Moscow 1839 - St. Petersburg 1915)

A Study for 'A Street Scene in Cairo'

signed 'C. Makowsky' (lower right)
watercolour on paper
29.5 x 22 cm (11½ x 8¾ in)

The present watercolour is a study for Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky's *A Street in Cairo,* which hangs in the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. There is an enigmatic atmosphere in the narrow, shadowy backstreet in Cairo. A creeping haze of dense smoke rises in the background filling the surrounding air. Makovsky leads the viewer not only to witness the activity taking place, but also to imagine the sounds and smells that emanate from the dusty, cramped street. On the right-hand side, two ladies wearing blue hijabs stand by a doorway talking, while a donkey rests nearby. On the left, a seated man wearing a blue full-length shirt or gallibaya and turban wound around a tarbush (fez) watches the street activity.

In the background, the high ledge of a wooden kiosk is visible. It is possible that the booth represents a local food stall, and the smoke from the cooking taking place within and alongside. Two men wearing dark yellow gallibaya stand nearby wearing red tarbush. After adopting the tarbush in the 1820s, making it part of the military uniform, Egypt became a major manufacturer and distributor in the Middle East. However the wearing of a tarbush was banned in 1952, after the Egyptian Revolution, as a symbol of independence from Ottoman influences.

The tightly packed buildings on either side of the narrow street are linked by ropes holding squares of material, presumably to cast shade on the ground below. The intensity of the sun is evident in the striking contrast between the dark areas of shadow and direct sunlight that fall on pavement. On the right hand building, an ornate wooden balcony juts out from the first floor and small, repeated Arabesque designs are cut into the wood. Known as Mashrafeya these delicate and ornate screens are typical of Islamic architecture, and some of the best examples are found in Old Cairo. The small holes reduced the amount of light coming into the house, which not only kept the rooms cooler but also had a second, social function that allowed women to observe the activities in the street, whilst retaining complete privacy.

There are two major differences between the study and the Russian Museum's finished work. The first is the composition of figures on the right-hand side, where the donkey has been replaced by a man and a child. Secondly whereas the study is almost overwhelmingly bright, conveying the hot dusty atmosphere of Cairo, the oil makes a greater use of contrasts between light and shadow. This gives the work a slightly calmer feel, and is possibly not as atmospheric as Makovsky's study.

Makovsky trained at both the Moscow School of Painting from 1851 to 1858 and the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts from 1858 to 1863, but rejected the classical focus of these institutions in favour of representing real, human Russian culture in his works. He is known as one of the founding members of 'The Wanderers', or Peredvizhniki movement of artists, and was one of the most highly regarded contemporary Russian artists at the turn of the twentieth century, recognised for his talent as a painter of portraits and historical subjects.

Provenance:

Collection of the granddaughter of Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky.

Artist description:

Konstantin Yegorovich Makovsky was an influential Russian painter, affiliated with the "Wanderers". Many of his historical paintings, such as *The Russian Bride's Attire* (1889), showed an idealized view of Russian life of prior centuries. He is often considered a representative of a Salon art.

Konstantin was born in Moscow as the older son of a Russian art figure and amateur painter, Yegor Ivanovich Makovsky. Yegor Makovsky was the founder of *Natural class* the art school that later became as the famous Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Among the friends of the family were Karl Briullov and Vasily Tropinin. All children of Yegor became notable painters, like his equally famous brother Vladimir. Later Konstantin wrote ''For what I became I think I should thank not the Academy or Professors but only my father.''

In 1851 Konstantin entered the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture where he became the top student, easily getting all the available awards. His teachers were ¿M.I. Skotty, A.N. Mokritsky, S.K. Zaryanko, all of them pupils of Karl Brullov. Makovsky's inclinations to Romanticism and decorative effects can be explained by the influence of Briullov.

In 1858 Makovsky entered the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. From 1860 he participated in the exhibitions of Academia with paintings such as *Curing of the Blind* (1860) and *Agents of the False Dmitry kill the son of Boris Godunov*(1862). In 1863 Makovsky, together with the other 13 students eligible to participate in the competition for the Large Gold Medal of Academia, refused to paint on the set topic in Scandinavian mythology and instead left Academia without a formal diploma.

Makovsky became a member of a co-operative (artel) of artists led by Ivan Kramskoi, typically producing Wanderers paintings on everyday life (*Widow*1865, *Herring-seller* 1867, etc.). From 1870 he was a founding member of the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions and continued to work on paintings devoted to everyday life. He exhibited his works on both the Academia exhibitions and the Travelling Art Exhibitions of the Wanderers.

A significant change in his style occurred after traveling to Egypt and Serbia in the mid-1870s. His interests changed from social and psychological problems to the artistic problems of colors and shape.

In the 1880s he became a fashioned author of portraits and historical paintings. At the World's Fair of 1889 in Paris he received the Large Gold Medal for his paintings *Death of Ivan the Terrible, The Judgement of Paris* and *Demon and Tamara*. He was one of the most highly appreciated and highly paid Russian artists of the time. Many democratic critics considered him as a renegade of the Wanderers' ideals, producing (like Henryk Siemiradzki) striking but shallow works, while others see him as a forerunner of Russian Impressionism.

Makovsky became a victim of a road accident (his horse-driven carriage was hit by an electric tram) and died in 1915 in Saint Petersburg.

Collections

Makovsky is represented in the following collections: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Irkutsk Regional Art Museum, Russia; Joslyn Art Museum, Nebraska; National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan; Nizhni Novgorod Art Museum, Russia, amongst others.