

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



Richard Karlovich Zommer (Munich 1866 - Russia 1939)

Kirghiz on a Camel

signed in Cyrillic (lower right)
oil on canvas laid on board
30 x 20.5 cm (11 x 8 in)

In *Kirghiz on a Camel*, Richard Karlovich Zommer cleverly immerses the viewer into the scene. Unlike many Orientalist painters, we do not feel like a foreigner or a detached observer in Zommer's work, rather we become the Kirghiz rider, experiencing at first-hand this arid landscape and its unrelenting heat, the small shadow cast indicating the sun is near its highest point in the sky. Fully in command of his camel, the rider steadily encourages the animal on, his calm composure reminding us that, this journey is a routine part of his life.

For the Kirghiz, the camel was used both for the transport of goods and for their own personal use, such as transporting their house, or yurt, for which they would use two or three camels. The animals were fundamental to their nomadic lifestyle and their concept of 'All I have, I carry with myself.'

The term Kirghiz comes from the legendary chief, Kirghiz, ninth in descent from Japheth. The Kirghiz are a large and widespread division of the Turkish family, of which there are two main branches, the Kara-

Kirghiz of the uplands and the Kirghiz-Kazakhs of the steppe, which jointly occupy an area stretching westwards from Kulja to the lower Volga, and south from the head of the Ob towards the Pamir and the Turkoman country. Ethnically they are close to the Mongolians, while in language they are close to the Tatars.

Essentially nomads, the Kara-Kirghiz are mainly breeders of horses, and sheep as livestock, oxen for riding and, goats and camels as pack animals. The principle crops grown are wheat, rye, barley, oats and millet, from the last of which a coarse vodka or brandy is distilled. Trade is conducted chiefly by bartering, with cattle being taken by dealers from China, Turkestan and Russia, in exchange for manufactured goods.

The Kirghiz-Kazakhs, simply referred to as Kazakhs, are also predominately nomadic. Their dress consists of the *chapan*, a flowing robe of which one or two are worn in summer and several in the winter, fastened with a silk or leather girdle, in which are stuck a knife, tobacco pouch, seal and a few other trinkets. Broad silk or cloth pantaloons are often worn over the *chapan*, which is made of velvet, silk, cotton or felt, according to the rank of the wearer. Large black or red leather boots, with round white felt pointed caps, complete the costume. The domestic animals, daily pursuits and toils of the Kazakhs are in most respects similar to those of the Kara-Kirghiz. Some of the wealthy steppe nomads own as many as 20,000 large fat-tailed sheep. Goats are kept mainly as guides for these flocks, and their horses are hardy and capable of covering from 50 to 60 miles at a stretch. Amongst the Kazakhs a few are skilled in silver, copper and iron work, which are the chief arts besides skin dressing, wool spinning and dyeing, and carpet and felt weaving. However, trade mainly consists of exchanging their livestock for woven and other goods from Russia, China and Turkestan.

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*. Dschawachischwili 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.