SPHINX FINE ART



William Simpson (Glasgow 1823 - London 1899)

Mongolia. Group near the Great Wall of China.

signed and dated ‘Wm. Simpson 1875’ (lower left) and inscribed ‘Mongolians. Great Wall of China.’ (lower right),
signed again ‘Wm. Simpson’ and inscribed as titled on The Fine Art Gallery label (on the reverse)
pencil and watercolour heightened with white on paper
17.2 x 12 cm (6¾ x 4¾ in)

‘At the marriage of the late Emperor of China, there were
Mongol Princes who figured in the processions and ceremonies;
and many strange articles among which were ponies and camels, came to Peking through the Great Wall as wedding presents.’
-W. Simpson, Picturesque People: Being Groups from all Quarters of the Globe,1876.

The mounted pony is beautifully decorated with golden bells and a tassel, and patiently waits, ready to pass through the gate in the Great Wall on its way to Peking to be presented to the Emperor. Its rider, and another male figure behind, are wearing *deels*, a common outer garment in Mongolia. Their yellow colour, and the shaven head of the figure in the background, identifies them as Lamas. During the nineteenth century, it is believed that 45 percent of the male population of Mongolia were Lamas.

The blue of the accompanying woman's dress is broken up by a colourful silk waistcloth or *bous*. She displays her ornate gold earrings and an opulent necklace, suggesting she is married - the jewellery would have been received as a dowry. Her costume belongs to one of many native groups that inhabit Mongolia, all of whom have their own traditional dress, with varied colours, styles, and ornaments. The predominant colours of yellow and red within the clothing and ornaments of the figures are symbolic, since they are considered to be sacred colours in Mongolia.

The present watercolour, dated 1875, was reproduced as a print in Simpson's *Picturesque People: Being Groups from all Quarters of the Globe*, published in 1876. Simpson executed *Mongolia. Group near the Great Wall of China* using sketches from his trip to China three years before. The sketch would have been done 'on the spot, and with all that scrupulous accuracy of detail for which his [Simpson's] productions have always been so noted.'[1]

In 1872 Simpson embarked on a world tour, which saw him travel to Peking to record the marriage celebrations of the fifteen year old Emperor Tsai-Shun for the Illustrated London News in October that year. Whilst in Peking, Simpson took the opportunity of making a visit to the Great Wall of China. He reported the trip with great enthusiasm: 'The Great Wall twists up and down the hills, like the wild vagaries of Chinese ornamentation of the writhing contortions of their gods... it is one of the Seven Wonders of the World which one has read of and wondered about in boyhood. Who has not wished to see such a monument, and wondered whether fate would ever give him a chance of doing so?' In the text that accompanies the present work, he remarks that 'The Great Wall of China itself is an evidence of the former power and greatness of the Mongols. The only object of that vast work was to keep them out of China, and it did not quite succeed, for more than one conquest has passed the wall.'[2]

On his return to England, Simpson exhibited paintings from his Chinese tour at Mr Thompson's Gallery in Piccadilly, entitled 'All Round the World', and published his own account of the trip in *Meeting the Sun: A Journey around the World* in 1874.

[1]W. Simpson, *Picturesque People: Being Groups from all Quarters of the Globe*, 1876.
[2]ibid.

Provenance:

Fine Art Gallery.

Literature:

W. Simpson, *Picturesque People: Being Groups from all Quarters of the Globe*,1876, where illustrated as a print, Plate 14, with the same title.

Artist description:

Born into poverty in Glasgow on 28 October 1823, Simpson went on to become one of the leading 'special artists' of his day, and sketched many scenes of war for the *Illustrated London News*. His early years were very difficult living in a house with an abusive and alcoholic father, and in 1834 he was sent to live with his grandmother in Perth. Simpson's only formal schooling took place during this period and within a few years, he was working as an apprentice in the Glasgow lithographic firm of Macfarlane. The artist stated later that "this was the turning point which changed all my boyish intentions." It was during the years in Glasgow that he attended the Andersonian University and the Mechanics Institute in the evenings. His next position was with the lithographic company of Allan and Ferguson where he spent four years learning the trade. In 1851 Simpson moved to London where he was hired by Day & Sons. While at Day's he was able to work on several important lithographic sets.

He became famous initially for his work in the Crimean War where he was sent by the firm of Colnaghi to create a series of watercolors suitable for lithographing. In the late 1850s he was sent to India to sketch scenes relating to the recent Sepoy Revolt. He joined the ILN in 1866 and covered the Abyssinian Campaign of 1868. In 1870 he went to France to sketch the war with Prussia, and in the following year observed the barricades of the Paris Commune. During a trip around the world, he

stopped off in California and traveled to the Lava Beds area to report on the Modoc War in 1873. Five years later, he journeyed to Afghanistan to provide illustrations of the Second Afghan War that had broken out; he returned to London in the summer of 1879. In 1890, he observed the opening of the Forth Bridge and caught a chill which was to have detrimental effects on his health.

He died at home in Willesden, north London, on the 17th August 1899, and was buried in Highgate Cemetery. Besides his war pictures, he covered state events, coronations, funerals, and other ceremonies. He was particularly interested in India and sketched scenes of the Kashmir Maharajas.

Simpson was a noted ethnographer and antiquarian, and wrote extensively on ancient religions, customs, and ancient artifacts. During his time in Afghanistan, he excavated several ancient Buddhist topes. He was a frequent visitor to Windsor and Balmoral, and Queen Victoria acquired a number of his works. It is said that she intervened to prevent him from going out to Italy in 1859 to cover the Austro-Sardinian War, for fear that he would get killed.