SPHINX FINE ART



William Simpson (Glasgow 1823 - London 1899)

Circassia. Tcherkess of the Soubash.

signed and dated ‘Wm. Simpson. 1875’ (lower right) and inscribed ‘Circassians’ (lower left), 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)

‘We had had a long and tedious day’s journey among the hills, and reached a chief’s residence. This consisted of a number of small huts, built of wattle and daub, with thatched roofs, one of which was the konag, or guest house.’
-The Autobiography of William Simpson, R.I., 1903.

This joyful scene presents us with an intimate glimpse into Circassian (Tcherkess) family life, and also provides us with an illustrative narrative to describe the welcome that William Simpson would have received on his arrival at this particular Circassian village. The chief and his wife look down at their daughter, who proudly holds out a welcome gift. In front of them, two little boys dressed in Circassian coats play; in the background, one can see the thatched huts described by Simpson.

Circassia. Tcherkess of the Soubash, relates to the northern stretch of Simpson’s 1855 trip to

Circassia with the Duke of Newcastle. Rather curiously, it is dated exactly twenty years later. As with other works belonging to the original series, the present watercolour, *Circassia. Tcherkess of the Soubash,* was executed using the preliminary sketches which Simpson made during the 1855 trip.

The intimacy of the subject matter in Circassia. Tcherkess of the Soubash contrasts with the more historical scenes which Simpson was commissioned to produce for the Duke, of which *Circassians at the Fort of Waia, 8th October 1855* is an example. We can therefore assume that Simpson had never intended for *Circassia. Tcherkess of the Soubash* to form part of that original group; this would explain why he did not immediately transform the sketch into a watercolour on his return from Circassia.

In his autobiography, Simpson provides a detailed and reflective account of his trip to Circassia. The contemplative mood indicates that the voyage had a profound effect on him and perhaps goes some way to explain why he returned to the subject matter some twenty years later to produce it as a print in his *Picturesque People: Being Groups from all Quarters of the Globe* (1876).

Simpson's accompanying text to the present watercolour provides us with some wonderful prose describing the hospitality of the Circassians, and their customs, explaining how a sheep or calf would be killed in honour of the guests, and that 'the highest compliment we could pay our guest was to take up a piece of the fattest of the meat in our fingers, and present it to him; on receiving it he would retire into a corner of the apartment, and with his back to us eat the proffered morsel.'[1]

From the title of the watercolour, one can assume that the area from which these particular Circassians were from was nearby the River Subash. The river flows into the sea at the former site of Fort Goloven, which itself was the scene of heavy fighting between the Circassians and the Russians. Within a few years of Simpson's original 1855 trip, the Russians had defeated the Circassians. Simpson reflects on this in the 1876 text that accompanies *Circassia. Tcherkess of the Soubash* and notes, 'they had a saying among themselves "That the Russian cart would ultimately beat the Circassian hare in the race," meaning that no matter how brilliant and brave their own acts might be, the slow progress of their enemies was sure, and must gain its object at last.'[2]

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

Provenance:

The Fine Art Gallery.

Literature:

W. Simpson, *Picturesque People: Being Groups from all Quarters of the Globe,* 1876, where illustrated as a print, plate 3, 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.