

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



Nikolai Nikolaevich Karazin (Kharkov 1842 - Gatchina 1908)

A Kirghiz Gathering

signed in Cyrillic and dated '92' (lower right)
pencil, watercolour and gouache with gum arabic, on paper laid on card
17.8 x 14 cm (7 x 5½ in)

Set within a barren landscape, *A Kirghiz Gathering* by Nikolai Nikolaevich Karazin, presents us with a moment of intense discussion amongst a gathering of men. In the foreground, the charred remnants of a fire are visible, its dark mark seared onto this otherwise arid landscape. Our attention is drawn to the figures in the centre, in particular the two young, possibly Slavic, women seated on the right. The forlorn and cheerless posture of the women - one of whom has flung herself on the ground, her head gripped in her hands with frantic desperation - suggests that this scene depicts the negotiation of their sale into slavery. It is possible that the central male figure, wearing a woollen *papakhi* hat and yellow tunic, is a people-stealer from Turkestan, whilst the standing figure on the right is his Kazakh henchman. The two seated figures at the front of the group could be Uzbeks who are arranging the transportation of the two girls to Khiva, or possibly Samarkand, either for sale as domestic servants or for placement within a harem.

The white slave trade was rife in Central Asia until the mid-nineteenth century and centred on the Khanate of Khiva (now in modern day Uzbekistan) where there was a notorious market for captured Russian, Slavic and Persian slaves from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. During the first half of the nineteenth century alone, some one million Persians as well as an unknown number of Russians,

were enslaved and transported to Central Asian khanates. As the Russian empire expanded during the second half of the nineteenth century it abolished the trade as it conquered. When the Russian troops took Khiva in 1873, the noted American journalist and writer Januarius MacGahon (1844-1878) witnessed the elation of the freed slaves and described when, '[the Russians] came upon a crowd of Persian slaves, who received [them] with shouts, cries and tears of joy. They were wild with excitement. They had heard that wherever the Russians went slavery disappeared, and they did not doubt that it would be the case here.'¹

Interestingly the present work is dated as 1892, almost twenty years after the Russian liberation of the slaves in Khiva. However, it is possible that Karazin is representing an earlier scene witnessed while he was the official artist on the Russian Geographical Society's expedition to Central Asia, between 1875 and 1879, and it is likely that *A Kirghiz Gathering* was produced to highlight the humanitarian concerns of Imperial Russia.

In 1895 Karazin produced an illustration for *Niva* magazine, which was closely modelled on *A Kirghiz Gathering*. The subject and composition of *Prisoner, Episode from the Recent Past of Turkestan* is very similar, and some individuals, such as the woman lying on her front with her head in her hands, are almost identically depicted. The emotional turmoil of this captive is powerfully and effectively conveyed in both works. In the caption to the illustration, *Niva* discuss how although one could now pass through the deserts of central Asia in comfort and safety, 'not more than twenty years ago...whole caravans were killed in the steppes of snow and sand storms, people and animals falling from the heat and lack of water and, in addition, at each step one could run into an enemy: an ambush, death, or - even worse - hard, humiliating captivity'.² Karazin's work illustrates one of these terrible hazards, 'one of the saddest episodes of the recent past'.³

In the early part of his life Karazin had a highly successful military career and he retired after nine years in 1871, and from that moment devoted himself entirely to art and literature. He wrote novels, both for adults and children, and ethnographic studies, and partook in scientific expeditions, but it was his artistic ability that secured his lasting reputation. He worked as a journalistic illustrator during several Russian campaigns, capturing a vivid and closely-observed account of everyday life in the military, both during battle and during the relaxed hours off-duty. Under imperial orders he created several large military canvases, but his real talent lay in small watercolours and drawings of which *A Kirghiz Gathering* is an especially fine and moving example.

¹ MacGahon, J.A. *Campaigning on the Oxus and the Fall of Khiva*, (New York, 1874, p.233)

² *Niva* (1895, no. 37).

³ *ibid.*

Artist description:

Military themes dominated Karazin's work throughout his career, from large-scale history paintings to more intimate depictions of individual soldiers. At the age of twenty, he graduated from the Moscow Cadet School and stayed in the army for nine years, taking a two year hiatus in order to attend the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. He retired from military service in 1871, having experienced a number of military campaigns in a career for which he was officially recognised and rewarded for his exceptional bravery.

From this point, Karazin devoted himself entirely to art and literature. He wrote novels, both for adults and children, and ethnographic studies, and participated in scientific expeditions, but it was his artistic ability that secured his lasting reputation. He worked as a journalistic illustrator during several Russian campaigns, capturing a vivid and closely observed account of everyday life in the military, both during battle as well as when the soldiers were off-duty. Under imperial orders he created several large military canvases, but his real talent lay in small watercolours and drawings, in which his ability to make ordinary moments seem interesting and engaging shines through. By the time he died in 1908, his talent had been widely recognised and rewarded by the Russian artistic community.