SPHINX FINE ART

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

Portrait of an Arab

signed in Cyrillic (lower right)
gouache on board
35.5 x 25.1 cm (14 x 9⅞ in)

There is a real sense of fluidity and ease in the way in which Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky has executed this exquisite work. The viewer is drawn to and focuses on the details of the man's facial features, his eyes, open mouth and the form of his cheek. Makovsky achieves this by cleverly contrasting the shaded areas of the face with areas that are highlighted by the sun's soft rays and by employing looser, flowing brush strokes to form the Arab's robes. The sun catches the left hand side of his face and his eyes are heightened with white, which brings out the fierce intensity of his gaze. On his head, the man wears a traditional white turban, or *imaamah* which is wrapped around his red cap, or *kufi*.

Makovsky travelled to Cairo in 1873, following in the nineteenth-century tradition and interest in the culture of North Africa and the Middle East. The following account, given by Mary (May) Tyssen-Amherst in her journal *A FewEgyptian Memories,* provides an intriguing insight into one of the many trips she took with her parents to Egypt. May herself had an interest in painting, and during one of her early excursions to Cairo, she met Makovsky, who was also staying at the Shepheard Hotel. The artist made

a great impression on May: ‘He allowed me to sit beside him and watch him paint the portraits of all sorts of picturesque models… He gave me much encouragement and many valuable hints about painting, which have been the greatest use to me.’

Makovsky produced many comparable portraits during his trip to North Africa, another example being *Moor.* Like *Portrait of an Arab* this work shows a figure full of self confidence and authority, as he directly meets the viewer’s gaze. In both watercolours it is Makovsky’s ability to capture the individuals’ psychology which is the stand out feature of the works, and in both cases it is the subjects’ faces which are the most considered and finished aspects of the works. Makovsky often used these studies as a basis for figures in his later works, and he executed several large scale canvases depicting North African society and culture.

Traditionally known as a socio-realist painter, or artist who depicted the psychological strains of life, Makovsky’s return from his travels to Egypt and Serbia in the mid-1870s saw a change in his style, whereby he began to express more of an interest in the aesthetic and compositional nature of a work: henceforth, colour and form were key. These changes can be clearly observed in *Portrait of an Arab*.

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.