SPHINX FINE ART



William Simpson (Glasgow 1823 - London 1899)

Circassians at the Fort of Waia, 8th October 1855

inscribed 'Circassians at the Fort of Waia/ 8th Octr 1855' (lower left), signed and dated 'Wm Simpson/ 1858' (lower right)
pencil and watercolour on paper
25.4 x 42.6 cm (10 x 16¾ in)

William Simpson fills this watercolour on many levels, drawing our eye in to observe and appreciate the intricate detailing and the attention he has paid to both the clothing of the Circassians and the architecture of the fort. There are four principle groupings, which are arranged in such a way as to create a harmonious composition. By placing them on different planes Simpson creates depth, whilst also adding to the sense of perspective. This perspective is further heightened by the alignment of the *kindjal* dagger and its sheath in the foreground, which follows through to the trunks of the fallen trees, and in turn leads our eye further back to the Fort of Waia, and to the distant, bluish tinged, snow-capped mountains beyond.

Simpson's *Circassians at the Fort at Waia, 8th October 1855* documents part of his trip to Circassia in 1855 with Henry Pelham, Fifth Duke of Newcastle (1811-1864). Simpson had been the Duke's guide in the Crimea (the artist took the former Minister of War on a tour of the battlefields), and was subsequently requested to accompany him on a tour of Circassia to make sketches. The party, which included the Duke's servant Lucca, the writer Laurence Oliphant (1829-1888) and the marine artist, Oswald Brierly (1817-1894), sailed on 29th September 1855 on HMS Highflier, shortly after the Fall of Sebastopol. They travelled in Circassia with a large group of fiercely patriotic Circassians, who showed themselves still keen to drive out the remnants of the Russian forces, who were occupying a few of the otherwise abandoned forts.

A record relating to this particular part of the Duke's trip notes: 'At Waia, a small place on the coast, he [the Duke] took on board at his request the Naib, "priest, prophet, and prince" among the Circassians, together with one hundred followers - a matter of difficulty, as the surf was high... though happily no one was drowned. The Naib had recently been engaged in several battles with the Russians, of which he

gave the Duke an account.'[1]

Though we have no further details relating to this particular fort at Waia, it is representative of the numerous forts that the Russians began establishing as early as 1763 in preparation for conquering the Caucasus. The warring between the Russians and the Circassians lasted over 150 years and ended with the signing of loyalty oaths by Circassian leaders on 2nd June 1864. Many Circassians were subsequently moved out of their villages and deported to the Ottoman Empire.

Returning to the present work, *Circassians at the Fort at Waia, 8th October 1855,* one notes that the main group of figures in the foreground is centred on the attentive young man in the dark blue Circassian coat. The strong use of narrative motifs employed by Simpson, such as the open hand-gesture of the seated Circassian, combined with the communicative facial expressions of the other men, suggest that they are recounting something of some importance to this man. Such an interpretation would suggest that he is not a Circassian but one of the Duke's entourage, quite probably Lucca, who Simpson described as being 'familiar with all the languages of the Black Sea... I have seen him acting as an interpreter, standing in the centre of a circle of various races, turning round to each one as he spoke, replying to every one, and changing the language every minute.'[2]

The Duke and his party returned across the Black Sea to Balaklava on 4th November 1855. When back home in Scotland in 1858, Simpson made twenty or thirty such watercolours for the Duke, hence the additional date of 1858 on *Circassians at the Fort at Waia, 8th October 1855.* A further example from this series is dated just five days previous to the present watercolour.

[1] Martineau, J., *The Life of Henry Pelham, Fifth Duke of Newcastle, 1811-1864,* (London, 1908), p. 277.

[2] Simpson, W. & Eyre-Todd, G., *The Autobiography of William Simpson, R.I.* (London, 1903), p. 67.

Provenance:

Paul Theroux.

Exhibitions

London, The Fine Art Society, *Mr William Simpson of The Illustrated* London News, June-Oct. 1987, no. 23.

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.