SPHINX FINE ART



Nikolai Grigorievich Kotov (Tomsk 1889 - Moscow 1968)

Before the Mosque
signed in Cyrillic (lower left)
oil on board
27.5 x 37.5 cm (10¾ x 14¾ in)

Before the Mosque depicts an extensive mosque complex, with numerous outer buildings and a rising central blue tiled cupola. The low, soft light strewn across the buildings and the reddish tinge in the wispy clouds suggests that it is dusk and the figures in the street are preparing for, or leaving for, early evening prayers. The figures are seen wearing a variety of bright clothing, and Nikolai Grigorievich Kotov has applied sporadic dashes of yellow and blue paint on the garments to complement the jewelled colours found within the architecture. Whilst some of the worshippers are moving around, others perch pensively on stone boulders in the square outside the mosque.

The building style of the mosque is characteristic of Uzbek architecture and in many ways recalls Timurid architecture. The most characteristic feature of Timurid imperial buildings is their enormous scale, emphasised by huge entrance portals and thick minarets covered in tile decoration. The dome, eponymous with Uzbek architecture, became increasingly characteristic under the Timurids with the development of double-shell domes. The characteristic outer dome form is a tall 'melon-shaped' structure, as seen in Before the Mosque, and set on a high drum decorated with ribs which are covered in vibrant glazed tile work.

The large pointed arch on the left is also idiosyncratic of Uzbek architecture, and the feature is seen in public buildings throughout the country. During the Timurid Empire a large variety of arch forms were used including rounded, two, three, and four-centre arches, although the most common being the three-centred arch with a high crown, where the height of the arch was more than half the height of the entire opening.

Kotov's work is extremely varied as he adapted his art to the tumultuous changes in Russian society during the first part of the twentieth century. He travelled widely during the 1920's and 30's, throughout what was then the Soviet Union, completing several cycles of paintings and graphic works. He often depicted oriental subjects and the present work can be seen as part of these series. Another work from

his travels, *House for Sharbat* (Private Collection), is executed with the same loose, rapid brushstrokes, which helps capture the atmosphere of the respective locations. Although the present work is bathed in oppressive heat, compared to the cooler feel of House in Sharbat, both paintings demonstrate Kotov's ability to render his subjects in a controlled and harmonious palette. The manner in which *Before the Mosque* is dominated by shades of yellow can be seen elsewhere in Kotov's work, for example in his oriental sketch *In the Tent* (Private Collection)

Kotov studied in both his native Tomsk and at the esteemed Moscow College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. In 1922 he was one of the founding members of AkhRR; the artistic group opposed to the non-realist innovations of the avant-garde, and which quickly became the most influential artistic movement in Soviet Russia during the 1920's. He participated in numerous joint and solo exhibitions, travelled widely and even designed posters for the new Soviet regime. Today his work hangs in some of Russia's most prestigious museums, including the Tretyakov Gallery and the State Russian Museum.

Artist description:

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