

RICHARD KARLOVICH ZOMMER

(Russian 1866 - 1939)

Caravan in the Desert

signed in Cyrillic (lower right)
oil on canvas laid on board
27 x 47 cm (10¾ x 18½ in)

AS WITH HIS *KIRGHIZ ON A CAMEL* (CAT. NO. 47), IN *Caravan in the Desert* Richard Karlovich Zommer again provides us with an insight into the life of a solitary figure, this time a caravaner. Almost certainly a merchant, possibly even a Kirghiz caravaner, the man is probably on his way to sell or exchange his merchandise at market. His goods are carefully balanced across the backs of his three tireless camels. As well as providing a personal reflection on this figure, in *Caravan in the Desert*, Zommer also reminds us of the crucial role that camel caravans played in desert life.

Caravans have been described since the beginning of recorded history, and were a major factor in the growth of settlements along their routes, and providing security for pilgrims travelling to Mecca. The camel was the most common means of transportation in a caravan and was chosen because of its ability to go without water for several days, small appetite, adaptability to the mixed terrain, and incredible endurance. Camels were widely used by merchants and traders to transport goods such as tea for sale, as they had an unmatched capacity to carry a substantial amount of weight. The number of camels forming the caravan was dependent upon the quantity of goods to be transported and the security of the route.

The camel would sometimes be harnessed to a cart, as was the case in the tea trade, usually however the load was divided into two and placed on either side of the camel's back, as seen in *Caravan in the Desert*. Ropes would be passed through the nose ring and tied to the saddle of the camel in front. In this way the camels could be fastened together in strings of up to forty. On a long journey, a single camel would carry about 160 kilograms, and passengers would be carried in panniers which were hung one on each side of the camel.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, camel caravans facilitated the trans-continental tea trade from the tea producing areas of India, Ceylon

and China to Europe and Russia along the Siberian Route covering 11,000 miles. The Siberian Route, which was also known as the Tea Road owing to the great quantities of tea that were being transported, connected European Russia to Siberia and China. Construction of the route started in 1730 but was not finished until the mid-nineteenth century. The route started in Moscow and camel caravans would travel from Kyakhta, a trade post on the border with China, across Inner Mongolia to a Great Wall gate at Kalgan. The route was however eventually made redundant with the introduction of the Trans-Siberian Railway and Amur Cart Road.

The trade of tea in Russia dates from 1618, when the Chinese presented a gift of tea to Tsar Alexis of Russia. The new drink quickly gained popularity and to keep up with the demand, nearly 6,000 camels each carrying 600 lbs of tea entered Russia each year. The tea was primarily packed in the form of hefty hard-packed bricks, which would allow each camel to carry large quantities in a more compact manner. These bricks would also be used as units of currency. In 1915 China exported 70,297 tons of tea to Siberia, accounting for almost 65% of the country's overall tea exports. From Kyakhta, tea was transported to the Irbit fair for sale. Thomas Wallace Knox (1835-96) wrote the following about the fair in his book *Overland through Asia; Pictures of Siberian, Chinese, and Tatar Life* (1870):

'We met many sledges laden with goods en route to the fair which takes place every February at Irbit. This fair is of great importance to Siberia, and attracts merchants from all the region west of Tomsk. From forty to fifty million rubles worth of goods are exchanged there during the four weeks devoted to traffic. The commodities from Siberia are chiefly furs and tea, those from Europe comprise a great many articles. Irbit is on the Asiatic side of the Ural mountains, about two hundred versts northeast of Ekaterienburg (Yekaterinburg). It is a place of little consequence except during the time of the fair.'

