

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 9 7/8 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 Few Egyptian 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 Shepherd 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* (fig. 1). 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*.



Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky, *Moor*,
Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi (Figure 1)

