

# OSKAR SCHMERLING

(Tbilisi 1863 - Tbilisi 1938)

## *Caucasians on Horseback*

signed in Cyrillic (lower left)

oil on board

32.5 x 24.5 cm (12¾ x 9⅝ in)

**C**AUCASIANS ON HORSEBACK PORTRAYS A ROMANTIC panorama of a group riding through the Caucasus on a bright day. Three ladies, swathed in rich red kaftans with yellow lining and distinctive headdresses, make their way slowly through a mountain pass. The ruddy glow of the lead rider's face suggests a life spent in the open air. Behind the riders a bearded man wearing a turban walks patiently, a long thin staff held in his right hand. The dust from the road is lightly whipped up underneath the horses hooves, whilst all three riders appear to be enjoying their leisurely journey. In the distance, the snow capped mountains bathed in sunlight, extend along the horizon, whilst the lady at the back of the group can be seen gazing out at the landscape. There is a sense of nostalgia in this work as it seemingly represents an idealised journey through the peaceful and tranquil Caucasus. The red and yellow clothing worn by the women is consistent with that of traditional Armenian dress, therefore suggesting that *Caucasians on Horseback* is set in either Armenia, or the southern border of Georgia.

Oskar Schmerling worked in a diverse range of genres, including illustration and political cartoons, but his oil paintings, another example being *Caucasian Soldier Riding at a Gallop*, generally explore similar subjects and themes (fig. 1). The figures in both this, and the present work, are explicitly from the Caucasus, as Schmerling demonstrates a studied understanding of his subjects' distinctive costumes. Both works also convey how isolated and insignificant the figures are in the vast, empty landscapes, which are rendered in bands of muted colour. In fact the palettes of both paintings are relatively subdued, enlivened by the vivid patches of red in the foregrounds.

Schmerling was born in 1863 in Tbilisi and he studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts from 1884 until 1891. At the end of the nineteenth century, with no art school hitherto established in Georgia, aspiring artists went to train in foreign, largely Russian, universities and art academies. While in St. Petersburg, Schmerling published caricatures for several Russian newspapers and was awarded a silver medal on graduating from the Academy. From 1891 to 1893 he lived in Munich where he continued his studies with the well-known battle painter Frants Alekseevich Rubo (see inventory). Returning to Tbilisi in 1893 he became head of the newly established Tbilisi Art Studio, and later became director of the painting and



Oskar Schmerling, *Caucasian Soldier Riding at a Gallop*, Private Collection (Figure 1)

sculpture school at the Society for Encouraging the Caucasian Decorative Arts. Several prominent Georgian artists, including Lado Gudiashvili (1896-1980), studied under him here.

Georgia was part of the Russian Empire from 1801 to 1918. Like many other Georgians at the time, Schmerling struggled with Russian control and the subjugation of local culture. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, feelings of nationalism were prevalent and growing in Georgia. The nationalist writer Ilia Chavchavadze (1837-1907) embodied this sentiment as he sought to improve Georgian opportunities in a Russian speaking empire, as well as ensuring the preservation and study of their rich folklore. As a cartoonist and artist, Schmerling produced works that epitomised the essence of Georgian culture and tradition and it is highly likely that *Caucasians on Horseback* was created with this in mind. He also illustrated numerous children's books that retold legends and stories from Georgian history and was a noted political cartoonist.





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