

RICHARD KARLOVICH ZOMMER

(Munich 1866 - Russia 1939)

Sohbet

signed in Cyrillic and dated '1910' (lower right)

oil on canvas

49 x 75 cm (19¼ x 29½ in)

IN *SOHBET*, RICHARD KARLOVICH ZOMMER HAS depicted a central aspect of oriental life, as figures gather together in the local coffeehouse to escape the heat of the day. As the men congregate in groups of two and three, it is clear that the establishment is a central meeting point in the community, where people come to relax, chat and debate. The figures are all dressed in bright, vibrant colours, enhanced by the glare of the fierce sun. The coffeehouse's patrons shelter under the canopy or the shade of the tree, whilst they drink, eat and smoke shisha from their hookah pipes. Zommer has used a frieze-like composition, with the figures dispersed across the width of the foreground, which focuses the viewers' attention on the individualism of the characters. By capturing the intense heat and the relaxed convivial atmosphere of the coffeehouse, Zommer's lifelong fascination with the culture and customs of the orient is clearly demonstrated in *Sohbet*.

Whether coffee or teahouses, cafe culture was a central part of life in the oriental countries, where Zommer spent so much of his life travelling and working. These establishments were a key meeting point for people, a hub for a community's social life. For Zommer, who was fascinated by all aspects of oriental life, they were naturally a recurring theme in his work, another example being *Street Cafe, Samarkand* (fig. 1). Although compositionally different, the works both provide a snapshot of daily life, capturing the unfamiliar and curious aspects of the cafe, the oppressive heat, from which the patrons escape, and an atmosphere of quiet, relaxed conversation.

Zommer was born Munich, but at the age of eighteen moved to St. Petersburg, where he studied with great success at the Academy of Fine Arts. In the 1890s he worked as an ethnologist on an archaeological expedition to Asia, a trip that was to have a profound influence on his painting. His interest in ethnology is clearly evidenced in *Sohbet*, which focuses on the habits and customs of his subjects. This formative trip also sparked perhaps his most prolific period as an artist, during which he worked in a number of genres.

After the turn of the century Zommer moved to Georgia, from where he travelled extensively, walking the Caucasus Mountains in almost their entirety. He recorded scenes from his travels, works which are notable for their simplicity of composition, boldness of colour, and grasp of character. Zommer also became the first teacher of the great Georgian painter Lado Gudiashvili (1896-1980), who always acknowledged Zommer's formative influence, and the two artists exhibited together in 1926. Details of Zommer's later years are sadly lacking, although he was forced to leave Georgia in 1939 due to the oppressive Stalinist regime, and relocated, along with all ethnic Germans, to Siberia and Kazakhstan during World War II.



Richard Karlovich Zommer, *Street Cafe, Samarkand*, Private Collection (Figure 1)

