Alberto Pasini

Spirited Conflict, 1859 (69?)
Oil on panel

A cluster of eight men on flying horses skirmish in a desert, kicking up the dust under a blue sky. Pasini’s masterful brushwork captures the flickering movement of this drama in hot bright light. The riders in turbans or tall caps carry swords, bows and spears. One horseman charging from the left fires a gun. Another stretches his arms into the air as if prayerfully pleading. Accents of turquoise and red in the costume and sashes provide bright bursts of color. The riders are mostly turned away from the viewer in a faceless, impersonal battle.

This painting was completed between 1855 and 1870, during the period of Pasini’s travels to the East. His experiences in the East were the determining factor in establishing the strength of his career. Over these years, he would bring back to his studios in Turin, Italy or in Paris, numerous studies and drawings done on the spot which provided material for studio-finished paintings. Spirited Conflict was most likely created after his 1867-68 visit to Constantinople, where he drew material from the Turkish army, and Arabian horses.

Pasini came to specialize in exotic paintings of Arabian horses as well as oriental architecture of bazaars, palaces and mosques. Arabian horses were prized by Europeans in Pasini’s day and they were imported by them for breeding. Hallmarks of the breed include its exquisite wedge-shaped head, curling nostrils, and short back. They ranged in color from chestnut to black with a rare albino as well. They were tough, hardy and fast.

After his early training at the academy of Parma in Italy, Pasini moved to Paris in 1851 where he sought success as a lithographic illustrator. In Paris, he was swept up by Orientalism, the century’s craze for depictions of the Near East which was fueled by colonial expansion. While in Paris, he also developed an interest in plein air painting and became acquainted with some of the Barbizon artists. His first trip to the East came in 1855 when he was appointed official draughtsman to the ambassadorial mission sent to Persia by Napoleon III in hopes of preventing the Shah from entering the Crimean War on the side of Russia. From Persia, he travelled to Syria, Arabia and Egypt as well as Turkey where he would return later, in 1867.

After 1870, Pasini travelled less, dividing his time between his studio in Paris and his villa in Cavoretto near Turin. His attention turned increasingly to oriental structures such as bazaars, Ottoman palaces, and mosques.

Pasini exhibited regularly at the Paris Salon. He was the best known Orientalist of foreign origin in France. He was a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour as well as other awards. His enormous popularity extended to the American visitors to the Parisian Salons. Excellent examples of his work have found their way into American and Canadian museums.