

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Mortimer Menpes (Port Adelaide 1855 - Pangbourne 1938)

A Retainer from Cutch

Circa: 1903

1903

oil on board

41.5 x 32.5 cm (16 ³/₁₆ x 12 ³/₁₆ inches)

Signed lower left: Mortimer Menpes

Mortimer Menpes grew up in Port Adelaide, Southern Australia where he showed early artistic potential.

In 1875, aged twenty, he arrived in London with his parents, two of his sisters and Rosa Grosse to whom Menpes' father was guardian, her father having recently died. The sole beneficiary of her father's estate, Rosa became engaged to Menpes on the voyage over, and the couple were married shortly after arriving in Britain. It was a fortuitous union, Menpes acknowledged that it gave him both financial assurance and considerable artistic freedom.

Menpes studied in London at The Government School of Design, South Kensington (now the Royal College of Art), but it was his meeting with James McNeill Whistler in 1880 that transformed both his work and his social network. Together with Walter Sickert, he worked as Whistler's studio assistant, accompanied the American artist on sketching trips and shared a flat with him in Chelsea. Greatly influenced by Whistler's aesthetic, in particular his exploration of Japonisme, after his first trip to Japan in 1887 he held his first major exhibition: Paintings, Drawings and Etchings of Japan at Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell's, 160 New Bond Street in 1888, the same gallery where the present work was exhibited in 1903.

The show was a huge success, but it caused a rupture with Whistler, who was furious that his seminal influence on the younger artist's work had not been acknowledged in the catalogue. Despite Whistler's ire, the exhibition marked the beginning of Menpes' long and successful collaboration with Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell's. Virtually every other year, Menpes travelled to distant parts returning with material to be shown, such as India, Burma, Kashmir, Italy, France, Morocco, Egypt and Mexico.

The present work was painted in 1903 during Menpes' travels in India at the time of the Delhi Durbar - the celebration of King George VII and Queen Alexandra as Emperor and Empress of India between 29th December 1902 and the 10th January 1903. During the Durbar, Menpes was especially captivated by the regional costumes of royal retainers, the Indian tribesmen loyal to the British monarch. He featured some twenty illustrations of retainers and their massed processions in his book *Durbar*, with chapter five devoted to the Procession of Retainers. Writing on the spectacle, he noted (in Dorothy's words) that 'One broad sweep of changing, glittering colour was stretched out before us for mile upon mile, formed of clumps of retainers from the tribes of India. There were tribes from Cashmere, from the highlands and the lowlands, camels, elephants, men in armour, animals in armour, and costumes of every conceivable colour and form.' (Menpes, 1903, p. 71).

Menpes had first visited India in 1890. For the Durbar he was the guest of the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, and recorded and reported on the ceremonies and festivities for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Illustrated London News* and *Punch* magazine.

Provenance

Dowdeswell Galleries, London, 1903

Private Collection, Jersey, 2000 to 2025

Exhibitions

Dowdeswell Galleries, London, Mortimer Menpes: *The Durbar*, June, 1903.

Literature:

Mortimer Menpes, *The Durbar* (text by Dorothy Menpes), London, 1903, pg. 64, illustrated in colour.