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The Mausoleum of Isa Khan Tarkhan II

Sindh, Pakistan

Circa 1840-1860

Watercolour on board

37.5cm high, 27.5cm wide (painting)

Stock no.: A2623

Pausing to sketch the Mausoleum of Isa Khan Tarkhan II, Reverend Issacs was so moved by the tomb's solemnity and beauty, he began to contemplate the transitory nature of earthly splendour, and the short-lived glory of man. Issacs was one of many travellers to be granted inspiration by the venerable monument situated in Thatta, the former capital of Sindh. The mausoleum lies amongst a great swathe of tombs, enclosures, graves, khanqahs and mosques that constitute the necropolis of Makli Hill. The golden age of the site commenced with the Samma dynasty in the fourteenth century and continued until the death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707. The myriad styles of architecture demonstrated at the site reflect the diversity of worshippers from different faiths who considered the area to be of great religious significance. Whilst Hindu, Muslims and Sufi pilgrims visited the tombs of the Saints, musicians, scholars and poets sought inspiration in the landscape and buildings. A song by Zahir Thattawi reflects upon the beauty of Mirza Isa's Mausoleum describing it as though 'the fountainhead of Divine Light!' A lover of poetry and song himself, Isa Khan Tarkhan II spent much of his reign under Mughal administration in Gujrat. It is likely he developed an admiration for the intricate stonework executed by local craftsmen during this period, as seen in the decoration of his mausoleum. Building commenced in 1627 and took eighteen years to complete. Incorporating Gujrat and Mughal architecture with the delicate floral patterns and geometric designs favoured by Turko-Mongol rulers, the building presents an eloquent testament to the cultural diversity at the necropolis.

British involvement in Sindh developed as a result of Russian and French interests in India and Afghanistan. Situated by the Indus River and of strategic importance, the province became a defence base for the English forces. Following the first Afghan war and the Battle of Miani in 1842, General Sir Charles Napier initiated the annexation of Sindh. Until this time military artists and draftsmen produced the majority of images of the province. Technical drawing formed part of military education and many soldiers were commissioned to prepare topographical sketches of the landscape and monuments they encountered. These images were often the basis for lithographs, which provided an easy means of

satiating increasing curiosity about the campaign at home. Following the annexation, Sindh also became more accessible to professional artists. 1846 saw the invention of watercolours in metal tubes, encouraging artists to venture further and work directly onto the canvas.

Isa Khan's mausoleum provided inspiration for many British travellers to Makli Hill. A comparable watercolour by Keith Jackson depicts the artist painting at an easel from a similar viewpoint to the present work. Reverend Issacs also celebrated the rich ornamentation whilst undertaking his sketch of the tomb: "every single stone being beautifully carved in relief. There are no figures of men or animals, but every combination of scroll, lozenge, square, and circle, flowered and ornamented richly, and passages from the Koran, enclosed in borders of zig-zag and scroll-work."

The current painting bears no signature, however a British artist likely produced the work in the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1850's photographic developments resulted in the medium gaining increasing popularity. Technical drawings were no longer necessary and paintings of Sind fell into decline during the following decade. The closely observed detail and proportional delineation of the mausoleum suggests experience of representing architecture, while the modest yet effective use of colour and shading implies the confidence of an accomplished watercolourist.

As two men and their camels take respite by a ruined bridge, an air of tranquil serenity pervades the scene. In the distant archway fakirs carrying long staffs make their way to the entrance of the tomb. These itinerant figures represent the transience of man while the building denotes his accomplishments. In conveying the visceral transcendence that appears to suffuse Isa Khan's tomb like a fine mist, the painting unveils the site's numinous magnetism, which has beguiled travellers for centuries.