137 Cornelius David Krieghoff

1815 – 1872

Indian Encampment by Moonlight

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled on the gallery label
20 × 25 ¼ in, 50.8 × 64.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Daniel McGie, Quebec
Miss Jane P. McGie, Quebec
Galerie Walter Klinkhoff Inc., Montreal
Canadian Art, Joyner Fine Art, May 20, 1987, lot 116
Private Collection, Toronto

LITERATURE

Marius Barbeau, *Cornelius Krieghoff: Pioneer Painter of North
    America*, 1934, listed page 143, titled as *Camp at Night*
Cornélius Krieghoff 1815 – 1872, Musée du Québec, 1971,
    a related work reproduced page 42

AS A EUROPEAN immigrant, Cornelius Krieghoff was fascinated by "Indians" from his earliest days in North America. Fully one-third of Krieghoff's known paintings, around 450 works, depict First Nations people as their subject.[1] Krieghoff's artistic treatment of First Nations subjects evolved over time: his early paintings portray archetypes such as moccasin sellers or trappers with markedly similar facial features and expressions, while their costumes, baskets and beadwork are beautifully described, with painstaking attention to detail. François-Marc Gagnon contrasts this emotional detachment with Krieghoff's approach to the French Canadian *habitants*, for whom the artist felt a natural affinity. "Although Krieghoff identified with and felt close to French Canadians, he was, at least initially, intimidated by Indians. Struggling with his approach to the subject, … at first his treatment was from the outside."[2]

That said, as Gagnon observes, Krieghoff persevered in trying to penetrate a world he found foreign and irresistible. Over time, he would have met descendants of the Mohawks in Montreal, who had been converted to Christianity by the Jesuits and relocated to a village established at Kahnawake (or Caughnawaga, as it was called at the time). Later, in Quebec City, he often encountered the Huron at the village of Lorette. Unlike the Mohawks, the Huron men at Lorette continued to hunt and trap, and were frequently engaged by settlers, including Krieghoff and his friends, as guides on hunting or fishing expeditions. Thus, Krieghoff's portrayal of First Nations people underwent a subtle shift: his mature works of the Quebec period tend to subsume Indigenous subjects into the broader context of landscape, at once emphasizing their attachment to the land and recalling eighteenth-century European Enlightenment ideals of the so-called noble savage, uncorrupted by civilization.

In *Indian Encampment by Moonlight*, identified by Marius Barbeau as an early Krieghoff, the sense of distance from the subject is unmistakable. A wonderfully atmospheric night scene depicting a wigwam encampment illuminated by firelight next to a moonlit lake or river, the painting exudes Victorian-era romanticism, a frisson of fear-tinged excitement for the "exotic." The

vantage point Krieghoff has chosen is almost voyeuristic, with the viewer removed from the scene and spying from the shadows, as if uncertain whether it is safe to approach.

The composition is bisected along the diagonal, allowing Krieghoff to play with two contrasting sources of light. Much of the lower right of the canvas is shrouded in mystery, the orange glow of the fire punctuating the darkness to illuminate the shadowy figures against the monumental forms of two wigwams. Conversely, the left shimmers with silvery moonlight reflecting off the smooth surface of the water. In the foreground, where these two atmospheres collide, are the silhouettes of two canoes and a cross.

As Dennis Reid remarks, "Writers have over the years speculated where Krieghoff would have encountered Natives camping in this fashion in the Montreal region…. Nothing in any of Krieghoff's paintings indicates that he worked from sketches in the field."[3] It is notable that none of Krieghoff's paintings portray the actual Mohawk village at Caughnawaga, with its 200 European-style stone houses. While some historians contend that the Mohawks may have left the village during the summer months, perhaps setting up more traditional temporary encampments in the surrounding forests, others point out that Krieghoff's wigwams resemble Plains teepees, and likely reflect his practice of borrowing elements from other paintings and prints of the period.[4]

If *Indian Encampment by Moonlight* is not meant to depict a physical reality, it can be read as an evocative expression of an imagined place, rich in allusion, atmosphere and a sense of mystery. Its dreamlike quality softens the edges of the colonial encounter, evoking feelings and impressions like a piece of music. Multi-layered, complex and undeniably appealing, *Indian Encampment by Moonlight* reveals itself slowly and still has the power to fascinate the viewer nearly 200 years after its creation.

1. François-Marc Gagnon, "Perceiving the Other: French-Canadian and Indian Iconography in the Work of Cornelius Krieghoff," in *Krieghoff: Images of Canada*, ed. Dennis Reid (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, in assoc. with Douglas & McIntyre, 1999), exhibition catalogue, 227.
2. Ibid.
3. Dennis Reid, "Cornelius Krieghoff: The Development of a Canadian Artist," ibid., 61–62.
4. J. Russell Harper, *Krieghoff* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 49.

In Marius Barbeau's listing of Krieghoff's works, he describes this work as follows: "A very early picture in neighbourhood of Caughnawaga. Miss Jane P. McGie, Quebec. From Daniel McGie, and father and grandfather.

Bright campfire; two tipis. Six or seven people. Trees. Two birch bark canoes on shore. A cross over a grave in foreground. A lake or large river by moonlight."

ESTIMATE: $60,000 – 80,000