

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

CASTLE, John

fl. Russia 1734–43

John Castle appears in Russian sources as Я or Иоганн Кассель, and is said to have been born in Hamburg and been an officer in the German army. However Cook 1770 describes one “Cassels”, born in Prussia of a Prussian father and English mother, who conveniently assumed English identity for the greater ease of travel it offered in Russia and Persia. He worked in Russia under contract with the Academy of Sciences. He was enlisted as draughtsman to an expedition to the Urals and the Kazakh steppes in 1734 led by I. K. Kirilov, chief secretary of the Senate, inspired by Peter I’s interests in mapping his empire. Castle made topographical drawings as well as the first known pastel portrait in Bashkortostan. His “Journal von der A°. 1736 aus Orenburg zu dem Abul Geier...” recording his journey was published in Riga in 1784, where he appears on the title page as “John Castle einem Engländer und gewesenen Kunstmahler bey der Orenburgschen Expedition”. The manuscript was prepared for publication in St Petersburg in 1741, and carries a dedication to the Tsar Ivan VI.

One of the plates reproduces his pastel portrait of the Tartar chief; this may be the portrait he describes making in 1736:

Nahm daher also fort meine vorher präparirten und bey mir habenden Farben-nebst dem hiezu mitgebrachten Leder zur Hand, und mahlte den *Chan* in einer kurzen Zeit mit dem Finger aus freyer Hand dergestalts glücklich ab, daß auch die Chanin mit höchstem Bergnügen in diese Worte ausbrach: daß zwischen meinem verfertigten Portrait und Ihrem Gemahl kein Trofen Wasser dem andern könnte ähnlicher seyn, als wie den begehendes Portrait in mehrern anzeigt.

The dedication notes that Castle presented to the Tsar five original portraits (medium unspecified), which presumably include the two surviving pastels in Russian museums.

From Cook’s journal, it appears that in 1743 Castle moved on to Persia, following John Elton, the English sea captain who had been the surveyor on the Orenburg expedition, and in 1741 moved to Persia to build ships on the Caspian for Nadir Shah. Castle, according to Cook, was a madman of “most violent passions, quite ungovernable.” Elton refused to employ him, and informed the Shah that Castle was not a seaman but “was only bred a painter.” The Shah commissioned eight portraits, but, disappointed with the results, ordered Castle to be strangled; he was only reprieved when Elton pointed out the effect of such a sentence on the Shah’s efforts to recruit foreigners to his service.

Bibliography

John Castle, “Journal von der Ao. 1736. aus Orenburg zu dem Abul Geier...”, *Materialien zu der Russischen Geschichte seit dem Tode Kaisers Peter des Grossen*, Riga, 1784, II, pp. 611ff pp. 28f; trans., *Into the Kazakh steppe*, ed. Beatrice Teissier, Oxford, 2014; John Cook, *Voyages and travels through the Russian empire...*, Edinburgh, 1770, II, pp. 515–18; Alton S. Donnelly, *The Russian conquest of Bashkiria 1552–1740*, New Haven, 1968

Pastels

J.2118.101 Abul Geier [ABULKHAIR, or Әбілқайыр хан (1693–1748), Khan of the Little Horde], Chan der Kirgis-Caysack, Tartarischen Horda, pstl, 1736 (St Petersburg, GTG) φ



~grav. Castle 1784, Tab. XIII

J.2118.102 ALDAR Isekeev (c.1670–1740), a

Bashkir war leader, m/u, c.1736 (don: Ivan

VI)J.2118.103 A daughter of ALDAR, m/u,

c.1736 (don: Ivan VI)J.2118.104 ERALI Sultan

(c.1721–1794), son of Abulkhair, m/u, c.1736

(don: Ivan VI)J.2118.105 MURSA, a Tartar

interpreter, m/u, c.1736 (don: Ivan

VI)J.2118.106 NÄDER Šāh Afšār [Nadir Shah]

(1698–1747), shah of Persia 1736, m/u,

c.1743J.2118.107 Молодого башкира (young

bashkir), pstl/pchm, 41x32, sd “J. Cassel Fe”,

1735 (St Petersburg, GRM, inv. Ж-163. *Olim*

Gatchina) φ

