

# SIR WILLIAM RUSSELL FLINT, R.A., P.R.W.S.

(Edinburgh 1880 - London 1969)

## *Tried for his Life*

signed and dated 'W/ RUSSELL/ FLINT/ 1904' (lower right)  
watercolour heightened with gouache  
46.5 x 72 cm (18¼ x 28¼ in)

**Literature:** *Illustrated London News*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1904, supplement, p. ii-iii, illustrated.

**I**N THIS SCENE FROM THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR (1904-1905), the simmering tension in the dimly lit room is almost palpable. A Japanese spy stands tall, proud and upright before a Russian military tribunal, defiant in the face of their interrogation. The group of Russians display a range of emotions towards their prisoner, from curious admiration to exasperated anger. The spy remains resolute in the face of his certain impending death, determined not to have his secrets prised from him. The court is housed in the opulent and exotic surroundings of a Manchurian temple and the officers are seated around the altar. This setting is appropriately dramatic for the scene and adds intriguing Oriental detail, further engrossing the viewer.

Sir William Russell Flint painted the present watercolour for illustration in the *Illustrated London News*, a publication he worked for from 1903 to 1907 depicting world events. The picture was illustrated on a double page spread as part of a supplement to the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1904 issue, with the caption “‘Tried for his Life’ from the painting by Russell Flint. A Japanese spy before a court-martial, held in a Manchurian Temple.” The heroic portrayal of the Japanese figure and slightly negative representation of the Russians, in *Tried*

*for his Life*, can be explained by the fact that Great Britain was a close ally of Japan at this time, having signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 in an attempt to stem the Russian naval influence in the Pacific. The *Illustrated London News*' coverage of the Russo-Japanese War was generally sympathetic to the Japanese cause and Flint's watercolour should be considered in this context.

The Russo-Japanese war which began in 1904 came to its conclusion when a victorious Japan forced Russia to abandon its expansionist policy in the Far East, becoming the first Asian power in modern times to defeat a European one. The war developed out of the rivalry between Russia and Japan for dominance in Korea and Manchuria, and the Japanese victory permanently altered the balance of power in Asia.

Although very different from the nubile nudes for which Flint is now best known, stylistically *Tried for his Life* is an excellent example of his work for the *Illustrated London News*. For example his work *Homeless Millionaires*, which illustrates the 1906 San Francisco fire, is a comparable study in individualised emotions. Both works demonstrate Flint's technical mastery, as he manipulates light and dark in a dramatic fashion, fully taking advantage of his monochromatic medium.

Having studied in Edinburgh, Flint moved to London taking up freelance illustration commissions for various magazines and publishers. Due to its widespread distribution, his work for the *Illustrated London News*, of which *Tried for his Life* is a superb example, secured Flint's reputation across the British Empire.

After the First World War he became one of the most sought-after of contemporary artists and was rapidly recognised by societies including the Royal Society of Oil Painters to which he was elected in 1912. He was elected a member of the Royal Society of Painters in Watercolours in 1917, and President of the latter from 1936 to 1956. Knighted in 1947, he was accorded a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1962, the highest distinction that an artist can achieve during his lifetime. Adrian Bury describes how ‘in the infinite variety of temperament, vision, technique, achievement, despair and triumph recorded in the long history of art, Sir William Russell Flint takes a unique place. At its best, his work is perfect and without criticism.’<sup>1</sup> Bury also presents Flint as ‘the greatest master technically of the elusive watercolour method of art.’

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, R. *Biography of Sir William Russell Flint 1880-1969* (Edinburgh, 1980), introduction.



Sir William Russell Flint, *Homeless Millionaires: The Flight from the Flames at San Francisco – Where Money was Useless: The Plight of the Wealthy San Franciscans during the Burning of Nob Hill, the Finest Residential Quarter*, illustration for the *Illustrated London News*, 12<sup>th</sup> May 1906 (Figure 1)

