

The Shafik Gabr Collection of Orientalist paintings contains a fine range of images depicting Egypt in the nineteenth century. The aim in this overview is to explain the circumstances and influences which might have affected the way these multinational artists – French, British, Italian, German, Austrian and American – working primarily after 1835, painted in such thematically varied ways. Each topic period will include examples of works that illustrate its main points. There will be a concluding postscript and summary.

The First Period, 1820–1850



DAVID ROBERTS
A General View of the Ruins of Luxor, from the Nile.

This first generation of artists, predominantly French and British and primarily professional topographers or official illustrators, came to Egypt for many reasons: by invitation from Muhammad Ali, the new Ottoman viceroy determined to modernise his country (such as Pascal Coste, 1817–27¹), to record the newly discovered antiquities (Robert Hay, 1824–34²), to accompany scientific missions (Prosper Marilhat, 1831–33³) or to paint what rich patrons saw on visits (Charles Gleyre, 1834–35⁴).

The last and best artist in this period was David Roberts, in Egypt from September 1838 until February 1839. As a member of

the Royal Academy, he was the first artist to come to Egypt with the independent intention of making a portfolio of commercially profitable images. His on-the-spot drawings were converted into lithographs by the Belgian artist Louis Haghe, and the resulting publication, *Egypt and Nubia*, in three volumes, was published between 1846 and 1849. Most of the plates displayed the Pharaonic antiquities along the Nile from Gizeh to Abu Simbel, but he included views of Cairo's monuments and people, thus pointing to an increasing interest in Egypt's Islamic culture. Roberts's views portrayed, described and defined Egypt's land and people in a way that still provides important documentary information about the country as it was in 1840.

- 1) Coste published *Architecture arabe ou Monuments du Kaire* in 1837 from sketches made between 1818 and 1825.
- 2) Hay's Pharaonic drawings languish in the British Library archives. His *Illustrations of Cairo*, published in 1840, were drawn in 1828–29.
- 3) Marilhat served as an artist member of the Baron von Hügel scientific mission.
- 4) Recommended by Horace Vernet to the American John Lowell to provide a topographical view and a 'costume drawing' at each site visited.

The two views by David Roberts, *General View of the Ruins of Luxor, from the Nile* and *Approach to the Fortress of Ibrim, Nubia*, both done in 1838, are the earliest images of Egypt in the Gabr Collection. Their focus on accurate visual descriptions of architecture and topography is characteristic of the representation of this early period. Roberts's views also establish the romantic theme of ancient monuments along an eternal river. In placing his mode of transport, the *dhababiya*, in the foreground, Roberts also gives to the images a narrative dimension that previews the genre elements of subsequent periods.

Four artists in the Collection, Carl Werner, Girolamo Gianni, Alberto Pasini and Ernst Koerner, although chronologically later, paint in the same descriptive style of this period. Of the Pharaonic scenes, the one with the most narrative value is by Carl Werner (1808–94).⁵ He was trained in Leipzig, but from 1832 until 1882 he lived in Italy. He first visited Egypt in 1852, and in 1864 went back for a more thorough visit of the country. The Temple of Isis, the last and most beautiful of the major Egyptian temples, was a favourite subject of artists, and *The Inner Propylaeum, Philae* or *The Inner Courtyard of the Temple of Philae*, 1867, is one of three paintings Werner made of it.⁶

The courtyard setting highlights the two main facets of Werner's work: the detailed authenticity of the documentation and his fascination with Egyptian light. The reliefs on the second pylon – the Pharaoh making offerings to Isis and Osiris on the left, and to Hathor and Horus on the right – are meticulously drawn. Werner worked in watercolours, whose particular character and speed of execution made them a favourite medium for Eastern subjects. These rapid on-the-spot colour sketches could then be recollected later and recreated in the studio. Despite his impeccable realism Werner has taken some liberties with his scene. The composite capitals next to the pylon in fact belong to a colonnade before the first pylon,⁷ and with artistic licence Werner foreshortens the left and right colonnades of the courtyard so they abut the second pylon. In his treatment of light, Werner conveys the



CARL WERNER
The Inner Propylaeum, Philae.

- 5) Martina Haja and Günther Wimmer, *Les Orientalistes des Écoles allemande et autrichienne* (Courbevoie/Paris: ACR Édition, 2000) is a helpful source for all German and Austrian artists.
- 6) The others are: *Doorway Leading from the Court of the Temple of Isis to the Small Temple Known as the Bed of the Pharaohs*, 1873, and *Musicians at Philae*, 1877. Both are watercolours. Illustrated in H. De Meulenaere, *Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Brussels: Berko, 1992).
- 7) Compare with David Roberts: *The Great Colonnade in Front of the Temple of Isis on Philae*, plate 42 in Fabio Bourbon, *Egypt: Yesterday and Today. Lithographs by David Roberts, R.A.* Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996).



GIROLAMO GIANNI
Halt by the Pyramids.



GIROLAMO GIANNI
By the Caliphs' Tombs.

1868 and 1888. He has two paintings in the Collection, which must have been done on a visit to Egypt about 1886.¹⁰ *Halt by the Pyramids* shows the royal tombs lit by the soft light of a full moon, while in *By the Caliphs' Tombs* Gianni focuses on the Mamluk burial places below the Citadel. Both works focus on the monuments – the humans provide only colour and scale – and are almost photographic in their precision and documentary value.

The painting that is most similar to Roberts's views from the Nile is Alberto Pasini's *The Nile*, 1860. The Italian artist also places his sites across from the river traffic, but his real subject is the continuity of the Islamic monuments, from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries, which border the Nile. On the left is shown the tip of Rauda Island with the palace of Hassan Pasha al-Munastirli (ca. 1880) and the conical roof of the Nilometer (861) in the foreground.

8) The long pipe was favoured by the Turks, while the *shisha* (the Persian pipe, or *nargileh*, in which the smoke passed through water in a glass container) was favoured by the Arabs.

9) Compare with David Roberts: *Temple of Esob*, plate 53 in Fabio Bourbon, *op. cit.* Roberts contrasts the present with the past in the languid government envoy and the decaying temple lintel.

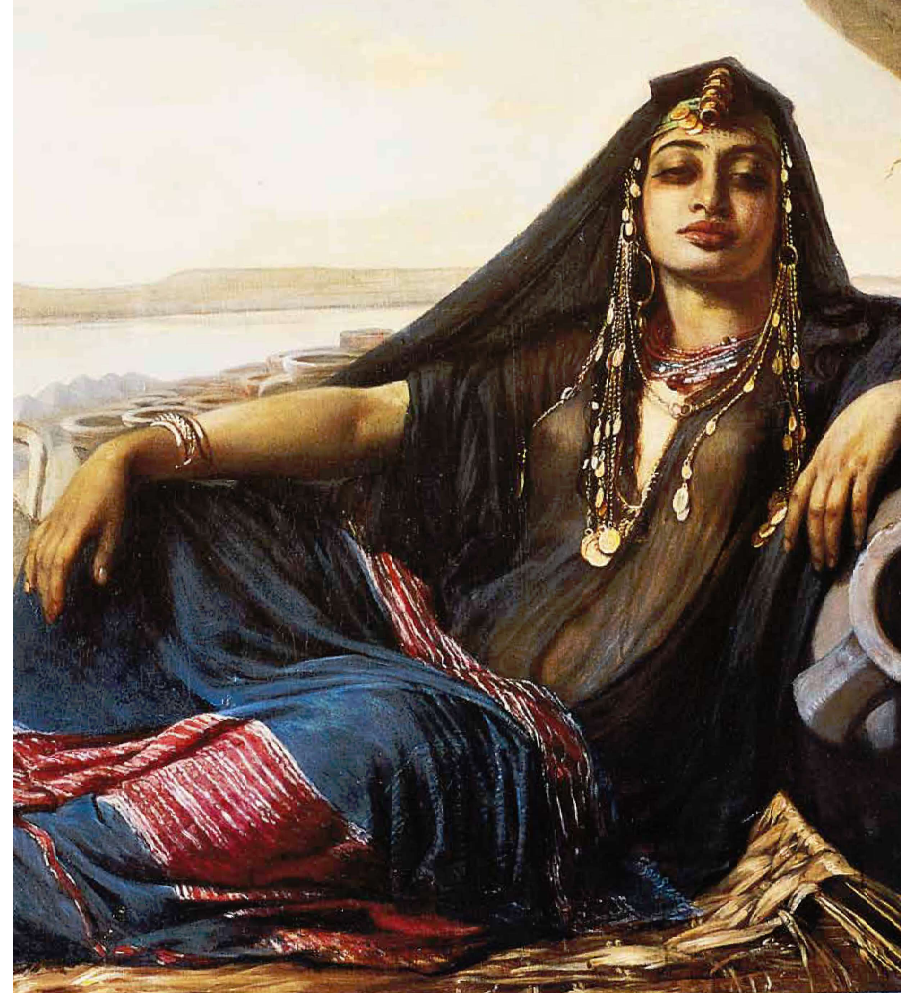
10) *Sharia al-Muiz li-Din Allah near Bayn al-Qasrayn*, Cairo, is signed and dated 1886. Christie's, New York, *Orientalist Art*, 19 April 2006, lot 11.

ELISABET JERICHAU-BAUMANN
An Egyptian Pottery Seller near Giza
(detail).

sun's dazzling brightness and the way it bleaches out all colour except for that on the figures sitting in the shade of the courtyard. In the centre sits the Turkish envoy of the Pasha. His servant attends to his *chibuk*.⁸ The local sheikh al-Balad, with his *shisha*, sits nervously at his side. There is irony in this contemporary ceremony played out against a backdrop of the Pharaoh serving his gods.⁹ Above the scene, an unarmed Arab stands on the ramparts and looks down, and one wonders if Werner has humorously inserted him as evidence of Egyptian curiosity about everything that happens.

Ernst Koerner's *The Temple of Seti I, Abydos* is the last dated Pharaonic painting in the Gabr Collection. As in the work of his compatriot Werner, Koerner plays on the comparisons of past and present. The carefully transcribed ancient rituals of Pharaoh's cult of Osiris on the half-shadowed, half-sunlit walls of the temple, seem to hold little interest for the contemporary Egyptian audience.

Girolamo Gianni (1837–95) was a Neapolitan artist who resided in Malta for twenty years between



RUDOLF ERNST

Reading

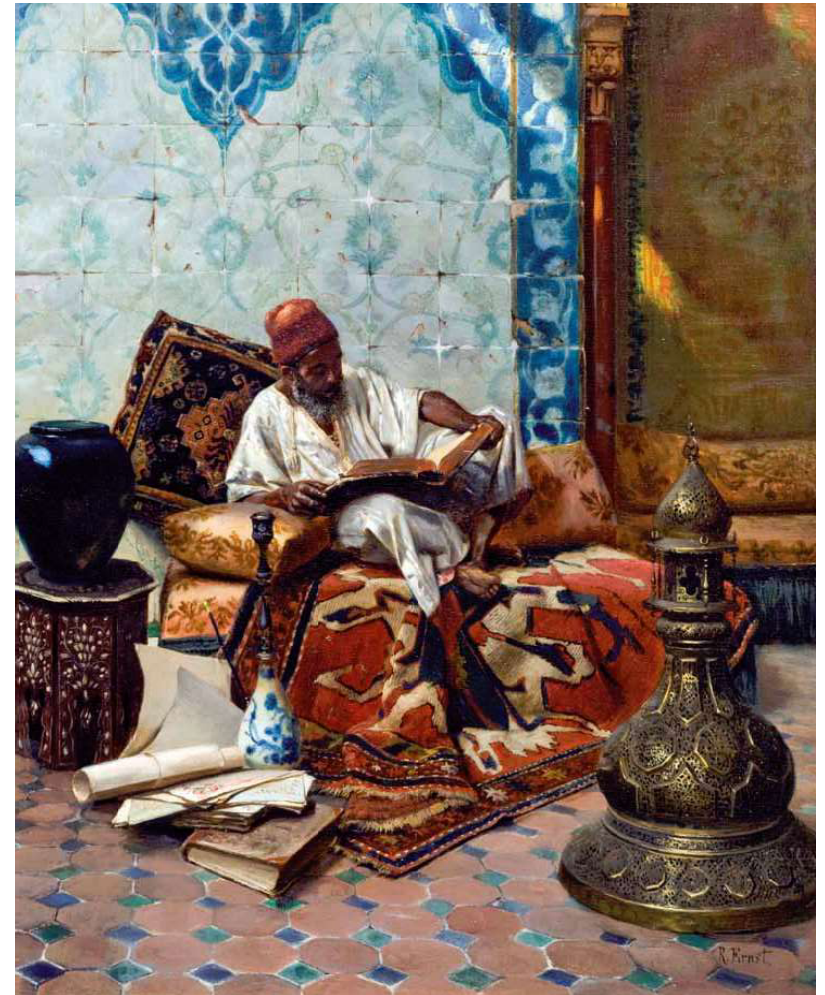
signed 'R. Ernst.' (lower right)
oil on panel
18½ x 14½ in. (47 x 36.8 cm.)

Provenance:

Richard Green, London, 1995

Ernst's work often depicts Muslims reading and reciting from the Qur'an, a ritual which can be performed anywhere and at any time. Sometimes the men are in mosques, but often in more private places. They are seen sitting on benches, in a large wooden stand which combines a seat and a low table, or else on the ground in front of a small fold-up stand. These supports enable the worshipper to turn the pages carefully, without damaging the holy book of Islam.

In this picture, as in others by the artist, the man is seated in a more informal and comfortable manner, probably in his own home. Another book and a pile of manuscripts, certainly secular rather than religious, await his attention. Readers, philosophers, scholars, were subjects which interested Ernst. These men are absorbed in what they are doing, in quiet and peaceful surroundings, an echo of the artist's own life when he lived in Fontenay-aux-Roses. In the painting here, the lovely carpet and cushions, the Syrian table inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the large ornamented bronze and the ceramic vase convey the impression of the house being that of a well-off owner. One can note that this vase often appears in Ernst's paintings, notably in the particularly successful ones of people plucking rose petals.



CHARLES-THÉODORE FRÈRE

Sunset by the Pyramids, Giza

signed 'Th. Frère' (lower right);
signed and inscribed on the reverse
'Pyramides de Gizeh Soir au Caire
(crêpuscule) Th. Frère'
oil on panel
8¾ x 14¼ in. (22.3 x 37.5 cm.)

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, Étude Tajan, Paris,
9 June 1995, lot 228



*Nineteenth-century photograph
of the Pyramids of Gizh.*

The transcription of a flat, featureless landscape compelled Orientalist painters to revise the picturesque conventions they had learned in Europe and seek new formal answers for their compositions. Often, they adopted a panoramic format in order to accommodate the unfamiliar vistas that confronted them. The best of these artists were energised by the process; the works of lesser painters dissolve into a monotonous expanse of sand and sky.

As the sun sets in the west, a village woman and her son return home after filling their containers with water.¹ The flatness of the landscape is relieved in the centre by the pyramidal shapes of the figures in the foreground, standing and sitting, which echo those of the royal tombs in the distance, and framed at its sides by the stately date palms. The alternating rhythm between the vertical and the flat or empty spaces seems to impart a sense of movement to the walking woman.

¹) The woman's two handed container is the same as pictured in the E. Jerichau-Baumann and Léon Belly paintings, pp. 286–91.



In Frère's art, while the familiar progression from foreground to middle ground to distant horizon is to some degree retained, there are innovative adaptations as well. Most dramatic, perhaps, is Frère's palette: his landscapes are infused with a shimmering, golden glow. Frère's sensitivity to the properties of light, and his attempt to translate them into paint, drew admiration from Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Eugène Boudin (1824–1898), and has led some scholars to locate the roots of Impressionism in France to Orientalist paintings. But, despite their heady atmospheric effects, never in Frère's art is that quality of realism – for which Orientalist painting was also renowned – entirely abandoned. Indeed, the affinity of Frère's paintings with contemporary photographs is often remarkably close.