

THE ART OF
BELGIAN PAINTERS
FROM THE SHAFIK GABR COLLECTION



THE COLLECTION

The Shafik Gabr Collection is a physical manifestation of the collector's relationship with the world of the Orient, an appreciation of the differences as well as the similarities in American and European visions and expressions of that world, and the opportunity such a collection presents for dialogue and a developing appreciation between the Western and Oriental worlds.

Beginning with his first acquisition, *Egyptian Priest Entering a Temple* by Ludwig Deutsch, Shafik Gabr has, over the course of almost three decades, assembled a collection that is impressive both in its richness and variety. With a large number of works by famed Austrian artist Ludwig Deutsch, as well as some of the finest examples of work by the great Orientalist masters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Frederick Arthur Bridgman, Gustav Bauernfeind, David Roberts, John Frederick Lewis, Étienne Dinet and many others, the Collection has become one of the most complete and magnificent tributes to the world of Orientalism in private hands, and therefore an important collection for scholars and art lovers alike.

ORIENTALISM IN BELGIUM

There are four Belgian artists in the Shafik Gabr Collection: Jan-Baptiste Huysmans, Karel Ooms, Edouard Verschaffelt and Émile Deckers, the first two belonging to the 19th century and the last two painting in the 20th century. These artists are represented by nine paintings, eight of which are portraits, and seven of which highlight the Berber inhabitants of the Kabylia area of Algeria, an independent and important segment of North African geography and history. Three of the artists originated from Flanders, the Flemish speaking area of Belgium with its rich traditions of portraiture, an inheritance which continues in their portraits of North Africa.

The paintings by these artists were produced also from in situ experiences, unlike other visualizations of the Middle East which were often scenes created from sketches and collected artifacts put together by artists once they had returned to their European studios. Huysmans, as a young artist, travelled throughout Algeria recording his trip not only in paints, but in print, while Verschaffelt and Deckers, lived in Algeria, one in Bou Saada and the other in Algiers, and were at home with its indigenous people and authentic customs. Karel Ooms signs his painting as having been done in Cairo.

These Belgian paintings add another dimension of authenticity to the rich portrayal of people and place offered by the Shafik Gabr Collection, as well as further points of dialogue with other representations in the Collection.



Published by The Shafik Gabr Collection

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ISBN 978-1-3999-1922-7

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INTRODUCTION

Orientalism*

The art of face-to-face engagement between East and West, of listening, looking, and learning with the objective of understanding cultural, religious, and ideological differences to allow for a better world by constructing bridges of understanding between all the peoples of this Earth.

*definition by M. Shafik Gabr

Belgium is a relatively small country, but nevertheless it produced many successful and prolific artists. One of the periods during which this was particularly the case is 19th century Orientalist art. Mid-nineteenth century was an eventful time for Belgium – in 1830, the Belgian Revolution led to the separation of the Southern Provinces from the Netherlands and to the establishment of a French-speaking and independent Belgium under a national congress. Moreover, Algiers was occupied by France, making travel to North Africa even easier for French-speaking people.

Many artists seized his opportunity to travel. Among them was Émile Deckers, one of the best-known Belgian Orientalists. Deckers, born in 1885, moved to Algiers in 1921 and lived at least 10 years of his life there, and then spent the rest of his time between Algiers, Congo and Belgium. During his time in Algiers, he focused mainly on local genre scenes and portraits of Berbers – Kabyle, Tuareg and other tribes. In these portraits of men and women, Deckers showed an incredible level of authenticity, understanding and compassion that can only stem from spending time in Algeria, getting to know its people, customs and way of life.

Unlike some ‘armchair Orientalists’ that never visited the places they painted and instead focused on the fashionable imagination of harems and odalisques, Deckers, as well as the other Belgian artists in the Shafik Gabr Collection, focused instead on authentic, everyday life scenes of the Algerian people, as well as their portraits.

The Fortune Teller of the Kabyle by Jean-Baptiste Huysmans, for example, depicts a typical day in the life of women in Algeria. These are not harem women performing exotic dances, but ‘ordinary’ women enjoying coffee and entertainment from a fortune teller (in other words, women being entertained is the focal point, rather than providing entertainment – an important factor).

Other Belgian artists in this collection also treated their subjects with a lot of respect. This is evident in *The Woman of Cairo* by Karel Ooms where the subject is dignified and proud, same as Edouard Verschaffelt’s



Jean-Baptiste Huysmans, *The Fortune-Teller of the Kabyle: Session During a Meeting Among Lady Friends*

Young Girl with Red Scarf, or the distinguished men in the portraits done by Émile Deckers.

I am very proud to have these artists in my collection, as I believe that the way in which they approached the subjects of their paintings can serve to us as a blueprint for our own interaction with people from different backgrounds and cultures – being respectful, considerate, observant and curious. This is the key to understanding one another, and understanding is the key for better communication which in turn leads to a better world.

M. Shafik Gabr

The mission of one of the Shafik Gabr Foundation's initiatives—*East-West: The Art of Dialogue*—is to promote greater mutual understanding by building bridges between emerging leaders from Egypt and the US, by instigating dialogue and the exchange of ideas between these two cultures. Established in 2012 in response to the increasing tensions building between the East and West, the Foundation sponsors and fosters exchanges between emerging leaders from Egypt and the US, and each year adds new countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Lebanon, Jordan, and Bahrain. For more information, please visit <http://eastwestdialogue.org>

THE ART OF BELGIAN PAINTERS

Belgium is perhaps not the country one first thinks about in connection with Orientalist or artistic depictions of North Africa and the Middle East, and yet the link is strong and viable. The Belgian part of the Shafik Gabr Collection is therefore a valuable introduction to some of these principal artists and their work.

The connection stretches back to 1830. In that year the French occupied Algiers, and, from 1848 until 1962, Mediterranean Algeria was treated as a metropolitan area of France. Eugene Delacroix (1798–1863) was one of the first artists to exploit this relationship. On his way back from Morocco as part of a diplomatic mission in 1832 he stopped for three days in Algiers, and, in 1834, produced *Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement*, an ethnographic depiction of three ladies and their maid in a domestic setting. Delacroix was entranced by the people and costumes of North Africa and further paintings he produced from his North African sojourn added a new and personal note to the burgeoning interest of Orientalism. Algeria, an exotic land of novelty and fantasy was a country whose French presence made it considerably easier for French speakers to visit, and with Marseille as a port of embarkation, the coastal cities of Algeria were not far from France. With light and color as two of its greatest assets, it is not surprising that Algeria's appeal continued long after Delacroix, through Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1914), Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and on to Alphonse-Étienne Dinet (1861–1929) whose paintings are well represented in the Shafik Gabr Collection.

The year 1830, had further importance: Belgium as a country was formed in a resolution to the complicated history of the lowland area, a nation at last, even though an imaginary line through the country divided North and South, one which divided the Flemish-speaking area of Flanders bordering on The Netherlands from the French-speaking Walloon part with its border with France. Of the four artists in the Shafik Gabr Collection of Belgian Orientalists, three of them, Jean-Baptiste Huysmans, Karel Ooms and Edouard Verschaffelt, are from Flanders, a region whose artists were dominant in the Northern Renaissance of 15th to 17th centuries; while Émile Deckers came from Walloon, the part of Belgium that spoke French.

Of these artists, Huysmans and Ooms worked in the last third of the 19th century. Ooms (1845–1900) is represented by a portrait done in Egypt, while Huysmans (1826–1906) is the only artist in this Belgian group to be represented with a narrative painting. Huysmans was a slightly younger contemporary of Jean-François Portaels (1818–1895), who is regarded as founder of the Belgian Orientalist school. In 1842, Portaels travelled for five years through Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Judea. His

many portraits and some narrative scenes made him the first Belgian artist to depict Orientalist subjects from life. In his long career of teaching, one of his students relevant to this introduction was Théo van Rysselberghe (1862–1926), not so much for his Orientalist work, derived from three trips to Morocco between 1882–1888, but more importantly in his continual trips to Paris, and for the pivotal role he played in the European art scene at the end of the twentieth century, and thus in the adoption and spread of Neo-Impressionism, which was to shape the work of Verschaffelt.

The output of Verschaffelt (1874–1965) and Deckers (1885–1968) belongs to the twentieth century. Both of these artists resided in Algeria: Verschaffelt in Bou Saada from 1924 until his death, and Deckers, in Algiers, from 1919, on and off, until 1965. Both painters are represented in the Collection with portraits, and both of them knew Alphonse-Étienne Dinet who in 1884 first encountered Bou Saada, a village of the Saharan Atlas chain, where he lived and painted from 1903–1929.

While the group of Belgian works in the Shafik Gabr Collection is expressed almost exclusively in portraits, this group has an important role in extending the scope of Orientalist work in the North African context. These portraits form part of the distinguished French Orientalist tradition in North Africa that began with Delacroix, as well as with the Belgian Orientalist tradition that began with Portaels, and now continues with Algerian artists. Furthermore, these portraits form part of a broader emphasis in the Belgian viewpoint, one which describes the realities of life – family, care, aging, ethnic features – rather than elaborations of the exotic novelties of the “orient.” In addition, the examples in this booklet present interesting comparisons with other paintings by other nationalities in the Shafik Gabr Collection. Thus, these Belgian paintings establish relationships and initiate dialogues. For scholars, students and art aficionados interested in Orientalism from 1800 to 1950, the Shafik Gabr Collection can be an excellent source for study and historical appreciation



Emile Deckers, *Portrait of an Artist (Etienne Dinet)*

Image courtesy of Leighton Fine Art Ltd.

Caroline Williams

LITTLE SHOE POLISHERS

Émile Deckers (1885–1968)

Signed, inscribed and dated with monogram 'ED 1926 alger' (lower left)

Charcoal and pastel on paper

24¼ x 17¼ in (61.5 x 44 cm)

Provenance

Private sale, Paris, 1995

Literature

Vidal-Bué, Marion: *L'Algérie du sud et ses peintres: 1830–1960*. Paris: Paris Méditerranée. 2003

Although Émile Deckers has an extensive oeuvre, mainly consisting of very authentic portraits of Algerian people, there is little bibliography and only bare facts are known about his personal life. Born in 1885, he was from Wallonia, the French speaking region of Belgium. After training at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Liège, he lived in the city of Algiers, to which he moved in 1921 in his mid-thirties. He lived until well into his 80s, and received numerous art prizes in his lifetime.

France had invaded North Africa in 1830. In 1848 France made Algeria a *Département* with Algiers as its capital. By the early 20th century many French and Europeans had settled in the city forming the majority of the population. Footwear was/is a distinguishing feature in the attire of foreign and native populations.

In this rendering of three young boys, Deckers seizes on an instance and a reality of urban life. These boys must supplement the family income by polishing shoes, to this day a common and simple way to make money in Middle Eastern cities. It is the square box that each boy owns that identifies their trade. The composition – a pyramid of form and color – is as simple as its subject. Two boys, one sitting with leg extended, the other with arm outstretched, are positioned in the foreground, while the third boy stands between and above them; the red *taqiyabs* (skullcaps) of the lower boys form a base topped by the red headdress of the boy standing above them. All gazes – the boys' and the viewer's – are directed to the boy's hand sketching in the dust of the street: perhaps a poignant expression of missed schooling, or an aspiration the boy has been kept from achieving.

There is also in the Shafik Gabr Collection, a watercolor by Vahram Manavian of three shoe polishers in Cairo, c. 1911, whose open boxes show the brushes and pastes necessary to their trade.



Émile Deckers, *Little Shoe Polishers*

PORTRAIT OF ALGERIANS

Émile Deckers (1885–1968)

Signed, inscribed and dated 'EDeckers alger 1936' (lower left)

Oil on canvas

21½ x 32 in (54.6 x 81.2 cm)

Provenance

Sale: Poulain-Le Fur, Paris, 24 January 1996, lot 111

Literature

Trois Jeunes Algeriennes, Bonhams, 1 March, 2017, Lot 9

Three Studies of the head of an Algerian Beauty, Christie's *19th Century European Art including Orientalist Art*, #5955, November 21, 2012, Lot 73

Study of Heads of Young Girls, Sotheby's *Regards sur L'Orient*, November 18, 2013, Lot 177

Deckers studied at the Academie Royale des Beaux-arts de Liège. The academy dates back to its establishment in 1775, but its history from 1795 to 1830, when the area swung between French and then Dutch control, was undetermined and undefined. With the Belgian revolution, and the country's incorporation under an independent, Catholic, neutral Belgium, the Academie was re-established in 1835. Deckers must have enrolled there about the turn of the century, that is about 1900. It is also known that Deckers, thereafter, spent a short period in Paris, studying with Carolus-Duran, who died in 1917, and was famous for his portraits of high society members.

When Deckers moved to Bou Saada his specialty became portraits, in three or four versions of the same or of different persons. These depictions are different from those of Etienne Dinet, his fellow artist, whose Bou Saada paintings concentrate on people in contexts and/or engaged in some sort of action. The Belgian artist chose as subjects young Berbers, such as Kabyles, Tuaregs or Southern tribes, both men and women. Berber men had handsome, individualistic features, and the women were not veiled and wore colorful headscarves. Deckers painted realistic portraits of people living in an authentic culture barely touched by colonialism, and it is upon their faces, not their differing costumes, that he concentrates.

This portrait of Algerians is a simple arrangement of three heads; of two young men and an older one; one in profile looking to the left, the other two faces looking more directly out of the canvas. There is no indication as to who these men are. Perhaps they are just random tribesmen. Or perhaps this is a combined portrait of a father, on the right, with grey in his beard and mustache, gazing downwards or introspectively, and of his two sons, the older in the middle who will inherit from his father, and who looks directly at the viewer, while the man looking to the left is the younger son looking outwards and towards a different future.

The deep brown skin color of the faces is offset by the pale background against which they are placed. The only color in the composition belongs to the turbans: a brown-yellow floral print on the left, and a beige-cream stripe on the right. The colors of the turbans impart a rhythmic sweep to the grouping, while touches of thicker paint accentuate individual areas.

Deckers' portrayal of types also indicates a nostalgia for the authenticity of men and manners of a bygone era.

Deckers's immersion into the direct world of the Berbers was surely in contrast to the overlaid, multi-faceted world from which he originated. Deckers came from Liège, a major city of Wallonia, in the Meuse valley, not far from the border cities of Maastricht in The Netherlands and of Aachen in Germany. Liège was also in a major industrial steel manufacturing and coal producing area, an area of multiple languages, tangled histories and complicated relationships.

This grouping of men is an excellent example of the expressive portraiture Deckers excelled in, and of his fascination with the sturdy ethnographic types that lived independently of the twentieth century industrial world of Europe.



Émile Deckers, *Portrait of Algerians*

Image low resolution at this size (184dpi)



Beckers
alger
1936



THREE CHIEFTAINS

Émile Deckers (1885–1968)

Signed, inscribed and dated 'EDeckers alger 1937' (lower left)

Watercolour on paper

21½ x 32¼ in (55 x 82 cm)

Provenance

Sale: Gros-Deletréz, Paris, 11 December 1995, lot 85

Literature

David Gariff: *The World's Most Influential Painters...and the artists they inspired*. Quarto, New York, 2008

Portrait of Algerian Men, Sotheby's, Orientalist sale, Paris, 29 October 2008, Lot 102

Again, this is a portrait of three men. In this arrangement there is a definite progression of age. The man on the left is the youngest. He is at an angle, but he turns his head and stares out at the viewer with youthful self-assurance. The face on the right belongs to a man in middle age, with features matured and creased by time. Slightly above and between them is the head of an old man, the patriarch, whose facial hair has turned white and whose rheumy eyes water. He does not look out at the viewer, but seems lost in memories of the past. Perhaps this is a three generational portrait of the same family: grandson, grandfather and father, or future, past and present, in which the artist gives value to each stage of life.

Two of the men, left and center, wear turbans that are both head covering, and as a loose flap can be raised to protect the face against the burning rays of the sun or the sting of blowing sand. The head covering of the third man, on the right, shows the red skullcap, in narrow red strips above the ears, that is worn below the turban. The uncovered ears of the young man on the left, and of the middle-aged man on the right, show that over the years, they have been pushed forward by the weight of the turban material. This physical result of turban wear is a natural occurrence, and Deckers skillfully exploits the fact to add a temporal, psychological dimension to this portrait.

All of the turbans are finely rendered. The use of slight color variations and touches of impasto, or layering of paint, provide texture and dimension around the framed faces. Furthermore, under the young man's turban flap, on the left, Deckers, with a few deft strokes, suggests he is wearing a kachabia, or a Berber burnous, a loose fitting cape or cloak with a hood.

The combination of clothing, in natural fibered material, and of light turbans as frames for sun darkened faces, obviously fascinated Deckers.

Deckers' portraits in three or four "visions" became his specialty. In this there is a connection with Jean-Baptiste Huysmans. When that artist traveled through Algeria he drew plural head portraits in his journal, and remarked, "les types qu'on y rencontre sont vraiment saisissants" - the types that one meets are extraordinarily striking.¹ Multiple portraits in this arrangement enabled Deckers to fully exploit, and dwell upon, the facial characteristics of a group of men he obviously admired.

As an artist, Deckers's chronology falls within the period between 1910 and 1945 when Modernism in art, as a fundamental re-examination of the nature of reality and as a new spirit of experimentation, challenged the conventional strategies of linear narrative, temporal sequence, visual perspective and gave way to an awareness that no single interpretation of what one experiences or sees is ever sufficient. Into the new artistic visions of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, George Braque, Wassily Kandinsky, Deckers's Realist portraits provide an immediate recognition.²



Émile Deckers, *Three Chieftains*

1 J.-B. Huysmans: *Illustrated Travels in Spain and in Algeria, 1862: Notes and Impressions and at least 175 original sketches from life in pen and ink, on stone*, p.182

2 D. Gariff: *The World's Most Influential Painters...and the artists they inspired*, pp. 138-39

Image low resolution at this size (171dpi)





PORTRAIT OF THREE MEN

Émile Deckers (1885–1968)

Signed, inscribed and dated 'EDeckers alger 1943' (lower left)

Oil on canvas

26 x 34 in (66 x 86.4 cm)

Provenance

Sale: Gros-Deleltrez, Paris, 25 June 1996, lot 150

Although circumstances and dates in Deckers own life are scarce - he spent ten years in the Belgian Congo, and moved back and forth between Algiers and Belgium - he signed and dated all of his paintings, which is helpful in documenting his work, and for this one in particular might provide a hint as to personalities portrayed.

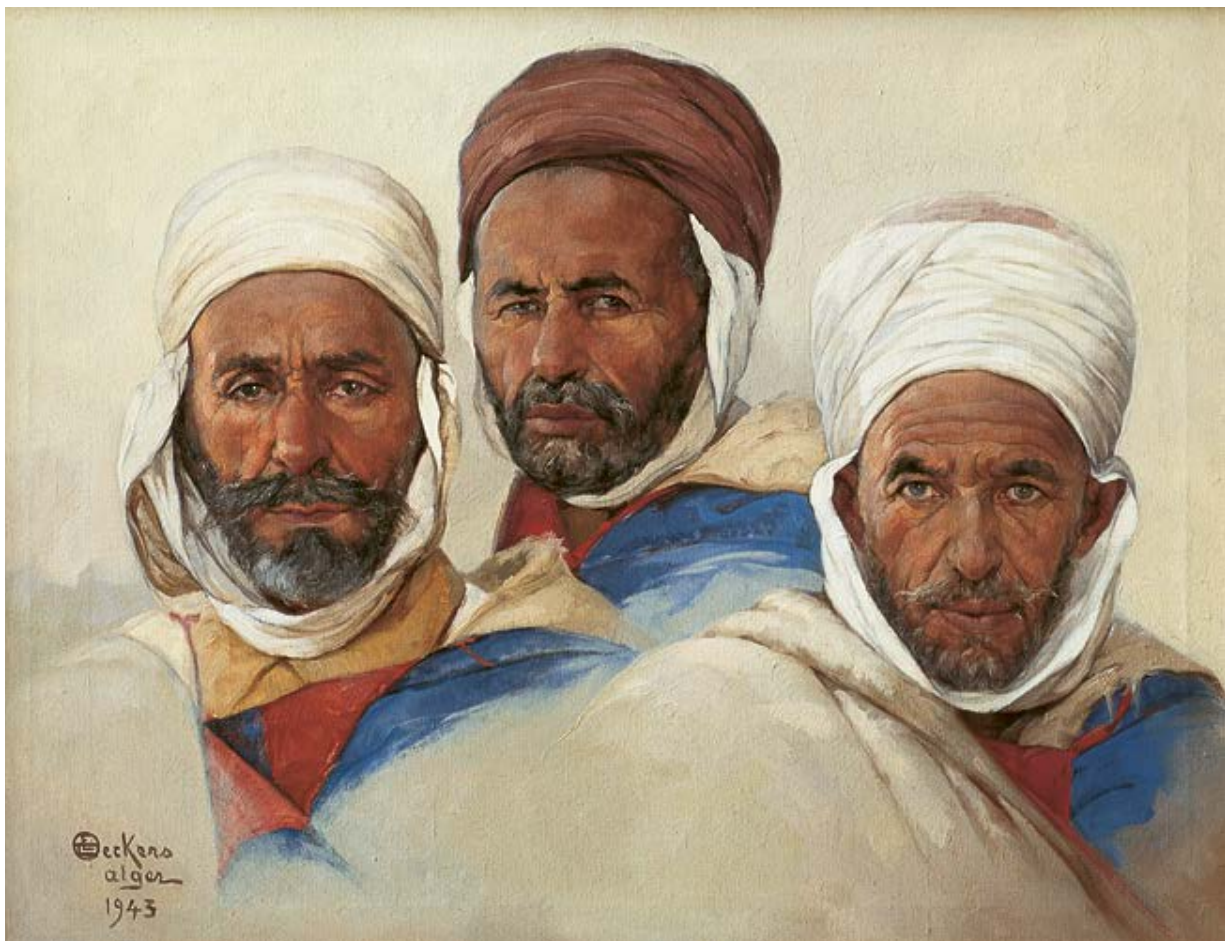
Three men look directly out of the canvas. Again, there is a triangular disposition to the grouping, and again Deckers does not indicate the men's identity or purpose. But in this arrangement there is more color, in the brown of the top central head covering, and more vividly in the red and blue that drape the men's shoulders. Do the red and blue hint at a military connection? In Deckers's 1950 *Portrait d'un militaire Algerian* the subject is dressed in a blue uniform and draped with a red cape. Perhaps this is hinted here.

The date of the painting, 1943, might supply another clue. Perhaps these men were part of the auxiliary force who provided vital reinforcements to the French Expeditionary Corps, a corps of men drawn from colonial troops made up preponderantly of native African men, most of whom had grown up in the Atlas Mountains. It was a corps which distinguished themselves in the Second World War. During the war Algeria was under the control of Vichy France (a proxy for Nazi Germany). In Operation Torch, Allied Forces led by General Eisenhower, landed in North Africa in 1942, the central and eastern prongs of the invasion being the ports of Oran and Algiers, in Algeria. Deckers might be commemorating soldiers who fought with the Allies and helped to liberate North Africa.

These Berber men wear turbans that start as a long strip of material that is wound around the head ending in a loose drape at the neck, forming an extra flap which can be raised to shield the bottom half of the face against the elements of nature.

The eyes of the man on the right are blue-gray, indicating a non-Berber or non-Arab lineage, perhaps a European ancestor brought to North Africa during the Barbary slave trade, in the Ottoman period from the 16th to mid-18th century. In his mustache, with the wispy, pointy ends, there is a suggestion of European dandyism.

These are the striking portraits of men who are self-reliant and know their self-worth. These are the visages of men who are resolute and purposeful. They look out of the canvas, with a direct and unwavering gaze towards the viewer. They are another grouping by an artist who was intrigued by the faces of authentic ethnographic individuals. Deckers was drawn to the Berbers who, as one of the few original inhabitants of North Africa, remained independent during successive rule by the Romans, Byzantines, Vandals, and Ottoman Turks, and, even after the Arab conquest of North Africa, maintained possession of their mountain domains, “powerful, formidable, brave and numerous people.”¹ Into the twentieth century, they continued to live in contained communities, free from acculturating factors: a group of people willing and able to fight for their freedom.



Émile Deckers, *Portrait of Three Men*

1 Ibn Khaldun: *Histoire des Berbères et des dynasties Musulmanes de l'Afrique septentrionale*, Paris, P. Geuthner, 1925, p. 176

Image low resolution at this size (180dpi)





PORTRAIT OF A MAN

Émile Deckers (1885–1968)

Signed, dated and located lower right “EDeckers alger 1943”

Oil on panel

16 2/3 X 12 1/2 in. (42.5 x 32 cm)

Provenance

Private collection, Belgium

Sale: Artcurial, Paris, 22 November 2016

Portrait of a Man, Algeria, Bonhams, February 1, 2017, Lot 105A

Although the multi-person head portrait was Deckers’ specialty, he also engaged in single views. After art school Deckers spent a short time in Paris, c. 1904, where he took lessons from Carolus-Duran (1837–1917) a very successful portrait painter and teacher.

This portrait is a striking composition of a single man. His brown-toned face not only stands out from the cream background, but is framed by the off-white turban combination that surrounds his face. He is of indeterminate age, half way between young and old. His riveting eyes look directly at the viewer. The lower half of his face is defined by the black hair of his mustache and beard. His lips are slightly pursed, but there is an upward twist to his mustache that softens the set of his mouth. Deckers’ portraits of Algerian men, represent strong, fiercely independent Berber individuals. His representations are part of the growing Orientalist appreciation of real ethnic types. This is a compelling face, one whom the viewer would like to know more about.

From the portrait examples in the Shafik Gabr Collection it would seem that Deckers just sought out male sitters. This is not the case. He painted many portraits of women, in groups as well as single. The patterns and styles of their head-scarf wrappings provided Deckers with an opportunity to add many colors to his canvas.

In 1924 Deckers painted a portrait of Étienne Dinet (see page 9). They both lived in Bou Saada, and the portrait was a tangible connection between the two artists, although not much else is known of their relationship. Apart from the essential characteristics of the man, his glasses, his European clothes, and his pale flesh tones, Deckers has framed Dinet’s face within the contours of a black beret, an immediately identifying staple of the French artist, and one which adds definite panache to the elderly man. Deckers imbues both men, the Algerian Man and the French Artist, with the direct gaze of their self-assured natures, but also ably conveys the difference in their nationalities, stations and characters.

Other portraits in the Shafik Gabr Collection with which this portrait of an Algerian man can be compared are: Franz Kosler, *The Elder*, c.1895; J. F. Lewis: *An Arab of the Desert of Sinai*, 1858; Jose Silbert, *Portrait of a Man*, after 1900; and G. Tornai, *Head Studies, Tangier*, 1890.



Émile Deckers, *Portrait of a Man*

THE FORTUNE TELLER OF THE KABYLE: SESSION DURING A MEETING AMONG LADY FRIENDS

Jean-Baptiste Huysmans

Signed: J.B. HUYSMANS (lower right)

Oil on panel

19 1/2 x 29 in. (49.5 x 73.5 cm)

Provenance:

Berko Fine Paintings, 2013

Literature

J.B. Huysmans: *Illustrated Travels in Spain and in Algeria, 1862: Notes and Impressions and at least 175 original sketches from life in pen and ink, on stone*. Brussels 1865. (Translation of the French title)

P. & V. Berko: *Dictionary of Belgian painters born between 1750 & 1875*. Knokke 1981, p. 361–362.

Greg. M. Thomas review of Roger Benjamin: *Oriental Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism and French North Africa, 1880–1930*, in *Nineteenth Century Art World Wide*, vol. 3, issue 2, Autumn 2004

E. Weeks, catalogue note for J.B. Huysmans: *The Celebration*, Bonhams, lot 111, April 13, 2011

Jean-Baptiste Huysmans was born in Antwerp in 1826 and died in Hove, near Antwerp, in 1906. He trained at the Royal Academy of Antwerp, 1843–1849, and spent most of his life in Paris, where he knew many of the Orientalist artists, including perhaps Jean-Léon Gérôme. For six years, from 1856 to 1862, he travelled around the Mediterranean, southern Europe and North Africa, about which he has written a lively two volume account. He began his trip to Spain and Algeria on March 13, 1862 in Paris with a visit to Charles-Théodore Frère, who he describes as “this very distinguished Orientalist painter,” and one who is represented in the Shafik Gabr Collection. On May 2, Huysmans arrived in Oran and continued from there to Tlemcen, where he was taken to a Jewish home, and then to Algiers, where he saw the harem area in the Casbah, both locations helping him with this painting. An endearing part of his recollections is the drawing in his notebook that shows Huysmans sketching in situ while being watched by the young ladies of the house and chaperoned by an “old Jew chanting his psalms,” a sketch which antedates a similar site painting of a sketching artist made by Gustave Bauernfeind in Damascus, which is in the Shafik Gabr Collection. Huysmans was also smitten by the range of Algerian male faces and drew groups of portrait heads (his Notes, p.282), as Émile Deckers was later to draw them.

The Fortune Teller of the Kabyle is chronologically the earliest painting in this Belgian series. It is the only one with a narrative content, as explained by its title. The scene is set in the inner courtyard of a house in the Jewish quarter of Algiers. Water drips from a basin in a central pool (although Huysmans has placed the basin off-center so as to fit it into the scene). The corridors around the courtyard are typical of Algerian

domestic settings as described by Huysmans, “ornaments and flowers are painted under the beams. The recesses... covered with tiles, of the most brilliant colors.”¹

The Fortune teller, the central lady, in white, is a Berber (a native Algerian) from the Kabylia region in the Atlas Mountains. She is adorned with a necklace of coral and agate stones from which hangs a silver pendant, as well as with silver earrings and bracelets. She sits in front of a small table upon which are the remnants of the coffee service with which she was welcomed: the pot, the delicate small cups in their metal holders, and on the floor, the tray. A discarded fan of woven palm fronds (which had appeared in Huysmans’ painting, *The Celebration*) lies further away. The Fortune Teller holds up the lucky and/or defining card to the audience clustered around her, the grouped ladies of the house. The two sitting nearest the pool, with tasseled head coverings, appear to be matrons. The one leaning against the column is dressed in a velvet jacket and loose pants, a two piece combination known as a *karabo*; the other matron is perhaps a visitor. On the other side of the table are two younger women. They have scarves (*mandil*) wound around their heads. One stands, the other one leans in. They are perhaps daughters of the hostess, the one in the *karabo*. A household maid, of darker complexion, with a yellow head scarf, sits listening between them. The ladies have kicked off their slippers and recline informally at home.

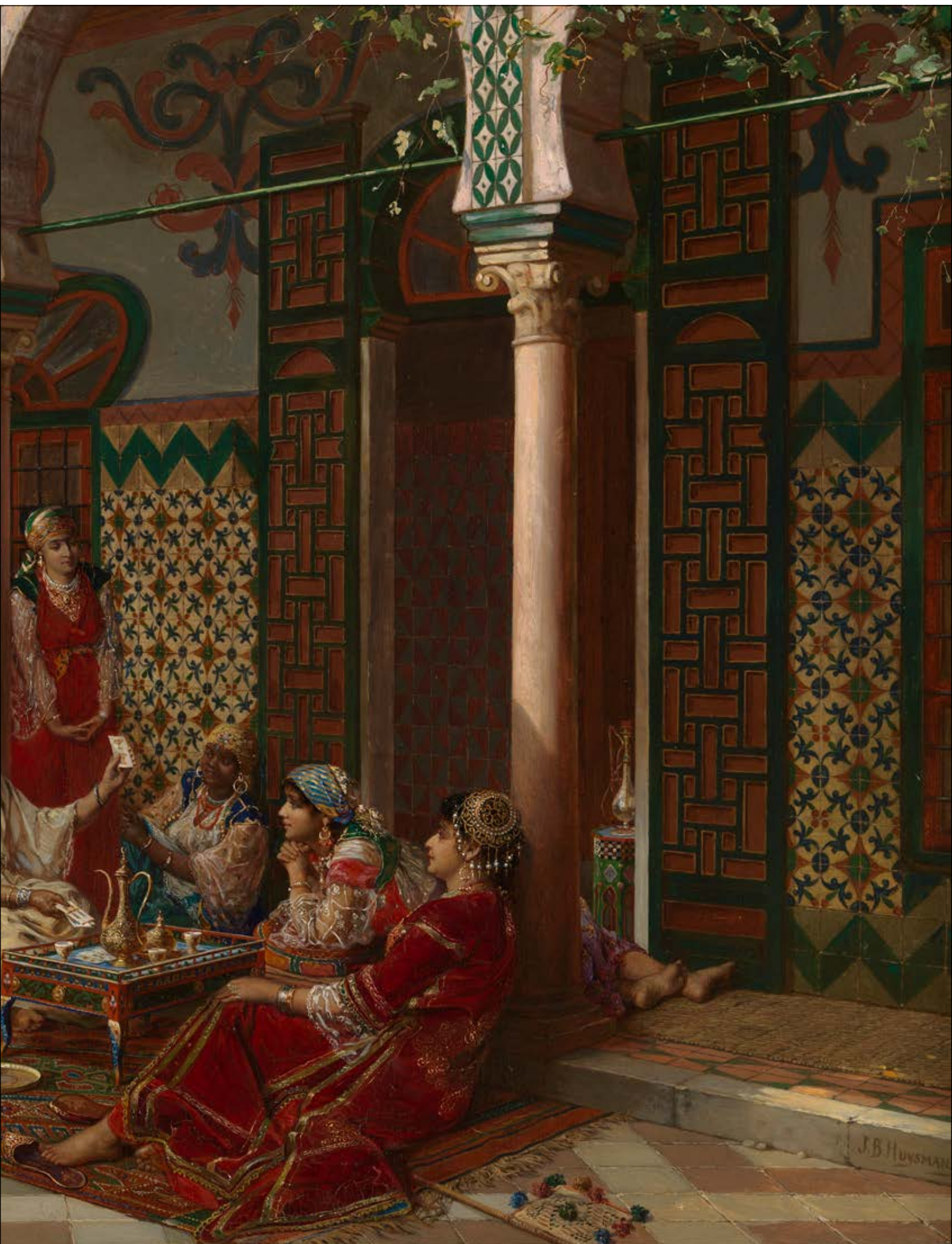
Entering from a door in the corner is a late arrival, a lady swathed in a white robe, a *baik*, the large over-wrap worn when a lady leaves her house. Her maid, in blue, glimpsed just behind her, serves to identify the lady in blue sitting on the bench, as also a maid. Their indigo *baiks*, mark them as Tuareg women, part of the Berber confederation.

Huysmans’ setting and people make a colorful image, but his depiction is compatible with ordinary and traditional female activities. These privileged women, primarily confined to their domestic quarters, eagerly court and anticipate the possibility of future diversion. The painting is signed but not dated. However, it must have been produced in the latter quarter of the 19th century, and as such has parallels with Frederick Bridgman’s *Nubian Storyteller in the Harem*, 1875, set in Cairo, and also in the Shafik Gabr Collection. In both depictions, these native women are seen in relation to their domestic lives rather than as fanciful odalisques.

In addition, two other paintings in the Shafik Gabr Collection depict similar interior scenes: Frederick Bridgman’s *Preparations for the Wedding, Algiers* and Gustave Boulanger’s *The Courtyard of the Palace, Algiers* – again, in both these paintings we can see charming depictions of family lives of upper middle class Algerian women.

1 Illustrated travels in Algeria: “sur les solives sont peints des ornements et des fleurs. Les niches sont relevées de faiences, aux couleurs les plus éclatantes” p. 215





THE WOMAN OF CAIRO

Karel Ooms, (1845–1900)

Signed and inscribed 'K. Ooms Le Caire' (centre right)

Oil on canvas

23 ¼ x 18 in. (65.5 x 46 cm)

Provenance

Private Collection, Belgium

Sale: Sotheby's, London, 27 June 2007, lot 162

Ooms was born into a large peasant family from Dessel in the province of Antwerp. At an early age he showed such talent for drawing that his hometown provided the financial support for him to study at the Fine Arts Academy of Antwerp where he was a pupil of the renowned Nicaise de Keyser, whose strengths were historical dramas and portraits. Ooms graduated in 1865, and set himself up as an independent artist in Antwerp. His career took off with *The Prohibited Letter*, 1876, primarily the portrait of an old man and a young girl, the two central figures in the painting, who as Protestants in a Roman Catholic environment are surprised when reading the Bible in the vernacular. Ooms travelled extensively in the Middle East. Most of his featured work is of landscapes of Egypt that he painted on location. In 1897 he married the Baroness Edith van Eersel, an art loving, rich widow. He moved to her villa in Cannes, but a weak heart led to his early death in 1900.

The Woman of Cairo highlights the twin influences shaping his artistic career: portraiture (portraits make up a third of his 220 known works) and the rural landscape (his other pictures of Egypt are primarily set along the Nile). He has signed his painting, but there is no date, nor is there tangible information about his time in Egypt.

The subject of the painting is a simple woman, a *fallaba*, a member of the Egyptian peasantry. Over her white patterned cotton indoor house dress she has donned a black outer *galabiya* whose neck opening is trimmed with colored cotton ends. Over the *mandil*, the cotton head scarf, she has draped her black *malaya*, the large rectangular all-purpose black outer-wrap that provides modesty, warmth and carry-all. A necklace of carnelian beads adorns her neck, drop earrings hang from her ear lobes, and blue and orange beads along with a silver bangle encircle her wrist. The Nile flows in the background, with a view perhaps of the Theban Hills. On the right, on the river bank, is a domed mausoleum, maybe belonging to a local saint. On the other side of the sitter, in the left corner of the painting, is a mosque, identified as such by its minaret, its dome and its multi-storied facade. It is not, however, representative of a village mosque. The three-stage minaret and the building's large scale, identify it as belonging to the Mamluk urban tradition. The inclusion of both buildings perhaps are meant to indicate the importance of religion in her life. She looks not at the viewer but into the distance. Hers is a simple, modest, self-possessed gaze, and her posture is self-contained. This is a classical style portrait.

What gives this painting special authenticity is that it is signed as having been created in Cairo. In the latter part of the 19th century it was common for an artist to paint in his European studio using memory aids such as sketches, photographs, clothing and artifacts collected in the Middle East. This portrait can be compared with other representations of Egyptian women in the Shafik Gabr Collection, most directly with *The Water Carrier*, another fallaha, by Vahram Manavian (Armenian), painted after 1911, or with Jerichau-Baumann's *An Egyptian Pottery Seller near Gizeh*, 1876. Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Jeune Fille Égyptienne*, c. 1877, and Franz Kosler's *Portrait of a Young Nubian Girl*, c. 1895, offer contrasts in class status and ethnic origin.



Karel Ooms, *The Woman of Cairo*

OLD MAN AND YOUNG GIRL

Edouard Verschaffelt (1874–1955)

Signed 'E. Verschaffelt' (lower left)

Oil on canvas

19½ x 31½ in. (100.3 x 80 cm)

Provenance

Sale: Gros-Delettrez, Paris, 11 November 1995, lot 247

Edouard Verschaffelt (1874–1955) was born in Ghent, in the Flemish speaking part of Belgium. There, he studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts before going on to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. He began his career by painting large historical canvases.

During World War I, in his forties, the German occupation of Belgium led him to leave the country with his family. He discovered Bou Saada, an important market place in mid-Algeria, 245 kilometers south of Algiers. The name translates as “father (i.e. origin) of happiness.” In 1924, he made the town permanently his home. After the death of his first wife, he married a young woman, a Berber from the tribe of Ouled Sidi Brahim, with whom he had a son and a daughter. Verschaffelt found his happiness in his new Saharan family, and they and their activities often served as models in his paintings. He continued to live and paint in Bou Saada until his death at 80 in 1955.

When Verschaffelt arrived in Bou Saada it was the “fiefdom” or stronghold of Étienne Dinet. The French painter had found the village in 1874, and, after the death of his wife, had lived there for most of the year from 1904 until his own death in 1930.

Although Verschaffelt and Dinet knew each other, they retained their differences as personalities and artists. Dinet converted to Islam, but continued his associations with France; Verschaffelt remained a Roman Catholic, and defined himself not as an Orientalist but as a Post-Impressionist. He painted an Algeria he came to know through his wife’s family and customs, not one overlaid with Orientalist expectations. He brought with him the Dutch heritage of portraiture and genre, and an attraction to the light and color of Impressionism.

This painting is undated, but belongs to the years between 1925–1955 when Verschaffelt lived in Bou Saada. The painting depicts in poignant detail one of the realities of village life as he became familiar with them. The old man, surely the little girl’s grandfather, now blind with cataracts, is dependent on his granddaughter to guide him around and to beg for their mutual sustenance, their impoverished circumstances and their need made obvious in their tattered clothes. His half-closed, unfocused eyes look upwards, while his hands are busy with his *misbaba*, the Muslim set of prayer beads. The pleading,

worried expression in the girl's eyes, the gentle touch of her hand on the old man's arm, the glint of the brass begging bowl she holds out, all successfully define a child who must assume the responsibilities of an adult carer. The artist has movingly individualized a fact that was very real at the peasant levels of the Islamic world: that offspring are not just children, but participants in the family's needs. The young at an early age had to assist in the family fortunes, and help the old who could no longer cope or manage.

In his use of impasto, as seen in the varying thickness of his paint strokes, Verschaffelt adds a living dimension to his subjects. In the muted brown and beige layers of paint, which create their torn and tattered clothes, and constitute more than half of the painting, the artist clothes his human subjects with substance and life. In addition, the eyes of the girl seem to follow the viewer from whichever vantage point one looks at the painting.



Edouard Verschaffelt, *Old Man and Young Girl*

YOUNG GIRL WITH RED SCARF

Edouard Verschaffelt (1874–1955)

Signed 'E Verschaffelt' (lower right)

Oil on canvas

3 1½ x 23¼ in. (80 x 60.4 cm)

Provenance

Sale: Étude Tajan, Paris, 10 June 1996, lot 215

This is a portrait with direct appeal. Verschaffelt combines dual influences: the vibrant realism of Flemish art with the immediacy of impressionist techniques to give self-possessed dignity to his young model.

Verschaffelt had access to the Ouled Sidi Brahim - the descendants of "Sir" Brahim - the indigenous population who lived in Bou Saada, but he also may have used his own daughter or an adopted family member as a model. Among his legacy there are a number of paintings of young girls with scarves around their heads, and a red one was a particular favorite.

The nomadic, Berber population made compelling subjects because they were not veiled. The young girl looks steadily and directly out of the canvas, while clutching her tattered clothes. Verschaffelt merges his empathy for his subject and his impressionistic skills to suggest the fringes of the shawl around her throat, and the thinness of her worn garment. The gold earring, however, is puzzling. She is presumably of Amazigh (Berber) origin, and if so the traditional jewelry was silver-based, not gold. The ear ornament, because it is so large and has multiple parts, does not hang from her ear, but is attached to her headscarf and is suspended alongside the ear. Jewelry in nomad society served as women's portable savings, to be sold in case of need. Bou Saada was an important market town. In the later part of the twentieth century, many women sold their silver and amber jewelry to European collectors. In so doing, they chose to wear gold instead, and this is what might have happened here.

Verschaffelt was born in Flanders, and although he studied art first at the Art Academy in Ghent his main impetus as an artist came from his time at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, one of the oldest such institutions in Europe. In the luminous strokes of his paintings, Verschaffelt exhibits his penchant towards Neo- or Post-Impressionism, which traces back its history to the Academy in Antwerp, to J.-F. Portaels, and to his student Théo von Rysselberghe, who, through his Paris connections, painted in a Neo-impressionist style. It is a style in which the separation of complementary colors into individual patches and touches interact optically to create shadow and dimension. Verschaffelt has used color and its application in thin and adjacent strokes to give substance and shape to the young woman's thin and torn clothes, and to impart life to an otherwise still model.



Edouard Verschaffelt, *Young Girl With Red Scarf*

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Opposite: Jean-Baptiste Huysmans, *The Fortune-Teller of the Kabyle: Session During a Meeting Among Lady Friends* (detail)





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Caroline Williams

Caroline Williams is a scholar of Islamic art and architecture, with an expertise in the architecture of Cairo. After receiving a BA from Radcliffe College in history, on a trip around the world, she visited Egypt in 1962, an encounter which led her back to Harvard University for a Masters degree in Middle Eastern Studies, and then back to the American University in Cairo for a second Masters in Islamic Art and Architecture. She has lived in Cairo, on and off, since 1965. As an independent Scholar, she has lectured and published articles dealing with Cairo in its various guises: as a repository of the most concentrated, varied and chronologically extended collection of Islamic monuments; as a city discovered in the 19th century by Western artist; as a city shaped by historic and contemporary forces, and finally as a patrimony described anew by Egyptian artists in the 20th century. In 1985 she published *The Islamic Monuments of Cairo: The Practical Guide*. Over the years the book has been expanded and updated, and in 2018 it appeared again in its seventh edition. She has taught courses in art and architecture in the United States and Egypt, and has been an escort-lecturer on various art and academic tours in Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia and Spain.

Opposite: Edouard Verschaffelt, *Old Man and Young Girl*





M. Shafik Gabr is a renowned leader in international business, innovation, investment and one of the world's premier collectors of Orientalist art, and an accomplished philanthropist.

During his career, Gabr established over 25 companies plus three investment holding companies including ARTOC Group for Investment and Development which, established in 1971, is a multidisciplinary

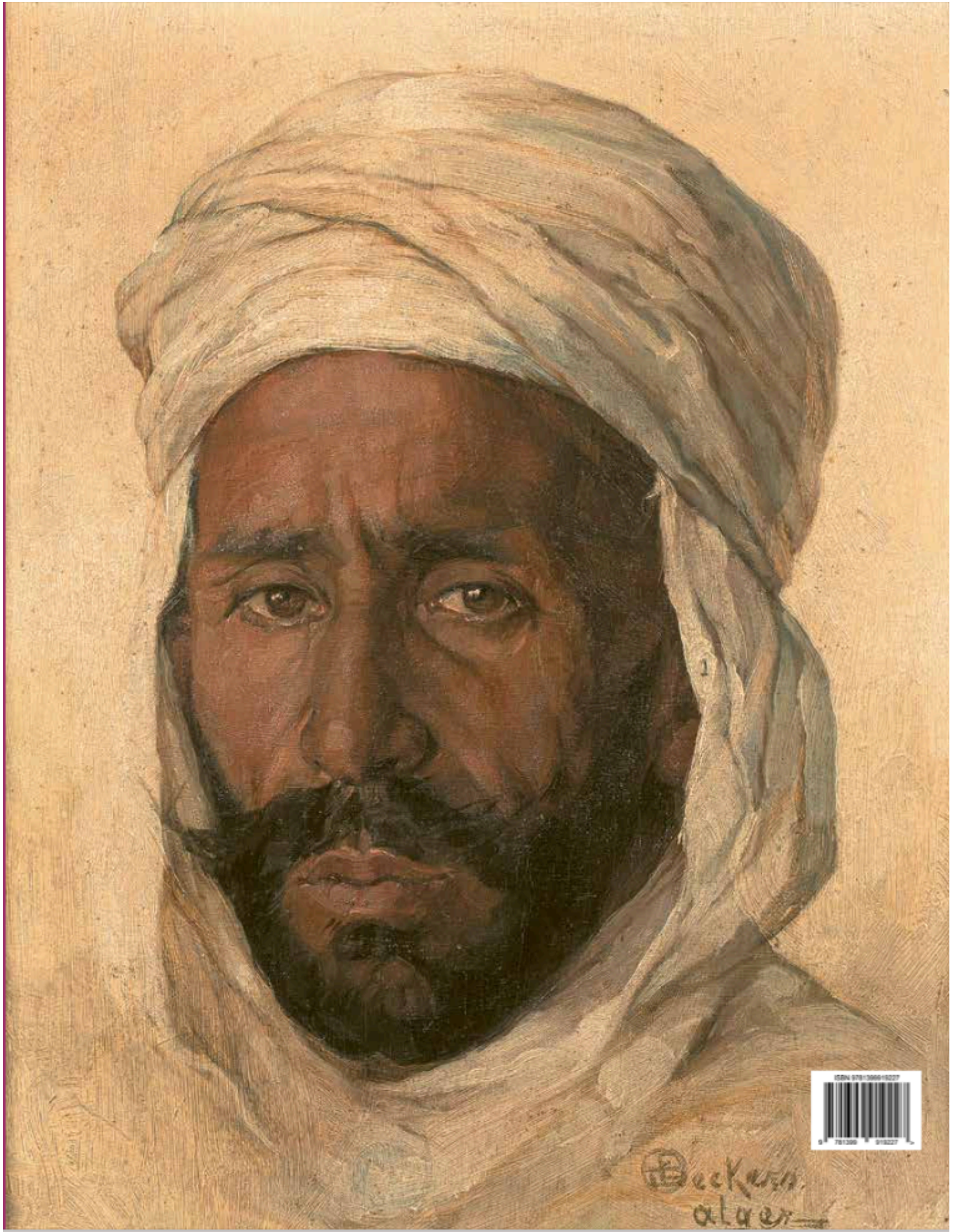
investment holding company with businesses in infrastructure, automotive, engineering, construction and real estate, over the past three years focusing on investment in technology and artificial intelligence.

Gabr is the Chairman and a founding member of Egypt's International Economic Forum, member of the International Business Council of the World Economic Forum, Board Member of Stanhope Capital, International Chairman of the Sadat Congressional Gold Medal Committee and Member of the Parliamentary Intelligence Security Forum. Gabr is Member of the Metropolitan Museum's International Council and serves on the Advisory Board of the Center for Financial Stability, Advisory Board of The Middle East Institute and the Global Advisory Council of the Mayo Clinic. Gabr was a founder of the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt in 1982, serving as its first Egyptian President from 1995 until 1997.

Among Mr Gabr's numerous awards are the Foreign Policy Association's award for Corporate Responsibility (2009), the Meridian Global Citizen Award (2014), the Middle East Institute's Visionary Award (2014), the American University in Cairo's Global Impact Award (2015), the College of Mount Saint Vincent's Saint Vincent de Paul Award (2016), the Drew University's Peacebuilder Award (2016), and the Policy Direction and Leadership Award from the London Center for Policy Research (2017).

Through the Shafik Gabr Social Development Foundation, Mr. Gabr is helping to improve education and health throughout his native Egypt. In 2012 Mr. Gabr established in the US the Shafik Gabr Foundation which launched in November 2012 the East-West: The Art of Dialogue initiative (see www.eastwestdialogue.org) promoting exchanges between the US and Egypt with the purpose of cultural dialogue and building bridges of understanding.

Mr. Gabr holds a BA in Economics and Management from the American University in Cairo and an MA in Economics from the University of London.



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