

An Egyptian Collector Publishes His Orientalist Paintings

BY PETER TRIPPI



Fans of 19th-century painting will be pleased to learn that A.C.R. Édition (Paris) has published the handsome volume *Masterpieces of Orientalist Art: The Shafik Gabr Collection*. Clocking in at 476 pages adorned with 377 color photographs, this massive book features essays and catalogue entries written by a team of leading scholars from around the world. Because the collection normally hangs in its owner's villa in the hills above Cairo, the book is invaluable not only as an armchair tour of the field for general readers, but also as a research tool for museum curators hoping to request temporary loans of specific works.

The magnanimous collector involved is Shafik Gabr, the chairman and managing director of ARTOC Group for Investment and Development. It was his ambassador father who inspired Gabr's lifelong love of travel, which led him as a young man to explore and record much of Egypt, the Middle East, and Africa with his own camera. Beyond being interested in how these regions appear today, Gabr also collected photographs taken by travelers long ago. It was not until 1990, however, that he became interested in painted depictions of his homeland.

The greatest number of Orientalist pictures date from the 1820s through the 1920s, markers of an international fascination that evolved gradually after Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt. The first Western artists to record what they saw were primarily French and British topographers and illustrators working on assignment, but their cohort grew ever more cosmopolitan as the 19th century wore on, with Paris always the epicenter of both creativity and distribution. Like other genres of painting, Orientalism reflected artists' attraction to photographic accuracy and then to impressionistic generalizing, yet it was also tinged with their audiences' zeal for ethnographic exactitude and their touristic hunger to ogle the exotic "other."

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Having stumbled upon Orientalist painting while traveling in Europe, Gabr recalls that he "studied it and visited museums and auction houses, window-shopping. When I felt I knew something, I bought" *Egyptian Priest Entering a Temple*, a superb panel by the Austrian Lud-



Shafik Gabr at home



Hermann Corrodi (1844-1905)
Kiosk of Trajan, Philae on the Nile
Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 25 1/4 in.

wig Deutsch (1855-1935). That purchase occurred in Paris in 1993, and today — less than 20 years later — Gabr owns 15 works by this gifted artist. Overall, his Orientalist collection encompasses just over 130 works, most dated after 1835. Not surprisingly, 79 of them depict Egyptian subjects. "I am very proud to be Egyptian," Gabr explains, "and greatly value my country's contribution to world culture."

The nationalities of the artists represented in the collection reflect the truly global character of Orientalism: American, Armenian, Austrian, Belgian, British, Danish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish-Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, and Swiss. Talented as they may have been, these artists were seriously out of fashion for most of the 20th century, and especially since 1978, when the late Palestinian-born literary scholar Edward Saïd published his influential critique, *Orientalism*. What Saïd actually thought of these pictures remains a matter of debate, but his book



Edward Lear (1812-1888)
The Pyramids at Giza, Early Morning
1854, Oil on canvas, 9 3/4 x 18 1/2 in.



encouraged most commentators to dismiss their content as emblematic of Western colonialism, racism, misogyny, and misunderstanding, and their format as evidence of the Salon's aesthetic conservatism. In lesser-quality pictures — thousands of which drift regularly through salerooms and flea markets worldwide — some of these accusations are fair and deserved. But more discerning collectors like Shafik Gabr generally bypass that material; indeed, he notes that he has shied away from harem scenes and the work of “armchair painters, who stayed in the comfort of their own homes, working just from imagination.”

Having stepped back from the post-colonialist fray, Gabr sees his pictures instead as symbols of the long and continuing conversation between the West and the Middle East. For a Western collector to think like this is one thing, but for an Egyptian to do so is quite another. “For many years,” Gabr observes, “we Arabs did not reconcile ourselves to Orientalism. Now, from those paintings we’re getting to know about our own traditions and are owning them.” He does not see these artists as participants in Western “greed and exploitation,” but instead as “respectful onlookers.” He says, “I see Orientalists as early globalists who brought the Arab world to the West and really contributed to mutual understanding. Far from colonizing their subjects, these artists actively bridged the Oriental and Occidental worlds. We owe them a great debt, because although much of what they saw lives on today in our streets and villages, we constantly need to be reminded of the richness and value of our culture.”

THE WORLD CATCHES UP

Although sales of top-quality Orientalist paintings and sculptures have been flourishing worldwide since the 1990s, it would seem

John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876)
An Arab of the Desert of Sinai
1858, Oil on panel, 17 1/8 x 12 in.



Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)
Napoleon and His General Staff in Egypt
 1867, Oil on panel, 22 3/4 x 34 1/2 in.



Eugen Bracht (1842-1921)
Rest in the Desert
 1883, Oil on canvas, 46 1/2 x 78 3/4 in.

that Gabr's revisionist viewpoint is increasingly embraced in the Middle East itself. At first blush, this may seem surprising given Islam's general wariness of representational art, but a closer look reminds us that, from the 1840s right through their demise in the 1920s, the Ottoman sultans were among the most enthusiastic consumers of Orientalist artworks. (In Istanbul these acquisitions can still be enjoyed at their 19th-century imperial palace, Dolmabahçe, and also at the Pera Museum established by the Suna and Ynan Kyrac Foundation.) Of much more recent vintage is

the collecting occurring now in various states of the United Arab Emirates, particularly Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Sharjah. (Details about Qatar's forthcoming Orientalist Museum are available at qma.org.qa/en/collections/orientalist-museum.)

The surging investment value of Orientalist art has surprised even Shafik Gabr: "When I started, I never thought of that, but as my collection started to grow, I began to be careful, aware that ridiculous prices can be asked — and obtained. Of course today I do look at it as an investment, but that's not my purpose in collecting at all. In fact, some deep-pocketed representatives of governments have approached me, but I have no interest in selling. Each painting is like my own child." Moreover, not all of Gabr's approximately 130 works are valuable in financial terms. "I have sometimes bought paintings by unknowns very inexpensively just because they are beautiful and complement my collection," he says. "Building a collection is like completing a superb puzzle piece by piece. For me, it is more than simply a collection of paintings; it represents a personal journey I have made, a passion I have, and a message I want to pass on."

Gabr has other passions, of course. In addition to his successful business, he oversees the Shafik Gabr Foundation, which supports projects in education (such as the American University in Cairo), medicine, hunger, emergency relief, and services for children and women (including efforts to stop human trafficking). He and his wife are also major donors to New York City's Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, which will receive the proceeds generated during the October 18 gala preview of the 24th annual *International Fine Art and Antique Dealers*



Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928)
Preparations for the Wedding, Algiers
 Oil on canvas, 41 3/4 x 54 1/2 in.

Show (see page 107). That evening Gabr will serve as Connoisseur Chair, so it would not surprise anyone if at least a few exhibitors there display an available Orientalist masterwork or two.

Shafik Gabr's activities as a collector, and now as someone eager to share his acquisitions with readers worldwide, have opened an intriguing new chapter in the history of Orientalism. The story of his journey, indeed of this genre itself, is still being written, and it will be fascinating to watch where it heads next. ■

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Gustavo Simoni (1846-1926)
The Musicians

Pencil and watercolor heightened with arabic gum on paper, 24 1/2 x 38 1/4 in.

